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THEY KEEP THEIR ENGLAND MERRY STILL

By JANE ANDERSON

Even the Wounded Who Are Coming Back to England to Die, Come Back Home Smiling

"It's 'Eaven—I Call It," Said a Bandaged Tommy of the Great White Hospital Train

Photo by Underwood.

A Glimpse of the Great Organization Which Brings Disabled British Soldiers from the First Line Trenches to London

FROM a closed British port to London I made a journey in a Red Cross train which, with great scarlet crosses marked on each blind compartment, carried a cargo of ninety-five wounded men—a precious cargo of war that I had seen transferred from the finest of his majesty's hospital ships to the cots of the ambulance train drawn up under the roof of the Admiralty pier.

It was through the courtesy of the War Office that I was permitted to board the hospital ship, to watch the unloading of it, to see each detail of a very complex and splendid organization, and to journey to London in one of the white ambulance trains created and set apart for the grave and pitiful purposes of war. I am grateful for these privileges.

I have come closer to the actualities of this war as it stands—have penetrated the surface of it. For these men who by thousands are returning to England bring with them, each and all of them, the stamp of it. It is in their eyes, the horror of it; it is in their words, in their gestures, the misery and the pain of it; it is written in their faces, borne witness to by every fold of their stained and shabby garments. It is France they are bringing home with them, France and the memory of all the gray and wretched splendor of war. This is in their faces; this and courage.

NOTHING SERIOUS THE MATTER WITH THEM, SAID THE CAPTAIN; MERELY SHRAPNEL.

At first, when I walked down the concrete pavement at one side of the pier, with its railway lines and great, spreading gray roof, I thought that the hundred men or more whom I saw sitting on benches in a square, inclosed place were but one more unit of the soldiers which throughout England bear testimony to the new army of the King. But as I came nearer to them, saw them sitting there, with on one side of them the white coaches of the ambulance train and on the other, anchored close in, the great white hospital ship with its broad band of green, I knew these were wounded men sent home from France. The slightly wounded men, they call them.

"These are not serious cases," the captain who was in charge told men. "Shrapnel, mostly."

I looked at the long rows of men in khaki sitting on the wooden benches, with their coats drawn loosely over their shoulders, with their bandaged heads and arms and feet showing a very clear white against the dim and gray light of the pier. How patient they were, and how tired they looked! Slightly wounded; shrapnel, mostly. One of them with his arm bandaged from the elbow to the wrist and supported in a wide sling; one of them with his feet wrapped thickly in layers of dressings and covered over with heavy woollen socks; one of them with his left hand in a splint and his right arm wrapped in gauze the full length of it; another man, leaning against the man next to him, with his thin hands folded across his knees, and his head and his face almost covered with fold upon fold of white linen. On his forehead a little round dark stain widened on the clean cloth. Slightly wounded; shrapnel, mostly. Such are the terms of war.

Then I went with the captain, who was also the disembarkation officer, to stand beside the gangway and see the stretcher-bearers carrying the wounded from the ship. It was such a fine, spotless ship, with her broad band of emerald like a big girdle around her. Her great red cross amidships, that clear and gracious emblem of service, proclaimed her inviolate, symbolized her, transfigured and illumined her; she rested, white, splendid, immobile, the rich sunlight streaming down on her decks.

On the pier the orderlies were waiting.

A BOATLOAD OF BANDAGED MEN WHO SMILED AT THE SIGHT OF HOME.

The gangway was lowered; and suddenly the ship, which had seemed an empty ship, became peopled. Men in khaki appeared everywhere. There were rows of them in the cabin doors; they stood by the rails; they came stumbling along the deck, two and two together, helping each other. Their khaki coats, shrunken, discolored, were fastened about their shoulders like capes, or with one arm thrust through a sleeve; their white bandages were extraordinarily immaculate in the brilliant sunshine, a clear and gleaming white. And all of these men were smiling. They told me afterward, some of them, how they had been waiting for the sight of England; and they told me about war. I knew then that I had known nothing of this war before.

But even when I saw them, these soldiers standing by the rails or stumbling across the deck, I knew that men did not many times in their lives smile as these men were smiling.

The episode of unloading them, whatever its gravity and its significance, was reduced to the most elemental and primitive terms. Orderlies, coatless, with their shirt sleeves and the sleeves of their undershirts rolled up to their shoulders, were hurrying up and down the gangway helping wounded men, or carrying wounded men, to the benches beside the ambulance train. If a soldier could walk, he put his arm about the shoulders of an orderly and made his way in whatever fashion he could to his bench; if he couldn't walk, he was carried. Upon occasion he was picked up and toted like a child, with his arms around the neck of the orderly, with his gray service blanket streaming out behind them, and his bandaged feet sticking out on either side.

DAY BY DAY THE WHITE SHIPS COME FROM NAMELESS PORTS TO ENGLAND.

Sometimes two of the wounded men would come fumbling and staggering down the gangway together, holding to each other. With intense concentration, without any knowledge of what was taking place around them, looking neither to the right nor the left, they progressed step by step, infinitely cautious. They advised each other, admonished each other, argued in an absorbed, gentle monotone, wholly engrossed, set apart, dedicated to this mysterious and immediate moment which lay between them and the harbor of the benches. With each uncertain step, with each circumspect, tentative advance, I think that a new cycle of destiny was spun for them, such was their earnestness and the simplicity of their world.

Thus, slowly, by open magic, the benches steadily filled. I don't know how many men were sitting there, nor how many more men were in the adjoining inclosure. But while I had been watching the unloading of the ship one ambulance train had been filled and had moved out, slowly, silently, toward her nameless destination. For each day, as the new offensive on the Western front fulfils the tragic bartering of men for land, the hospitals of England register toll for victory.

And this offensive, which has reclaimed territory valuable beyond estimation, was conceived with accuracy and true vision. Men were neither squandered nor offered up in sacrifice. Yet day by day the white ships put into harbor and the white trains come and go, weaving back and forth, fulfilling the purposes of war.

And I was watching one infinitesimal part of this. . . . It was moving very surely and precisely, the grave business of transference. I saw with astonishment that the deck was cleared. A little procession of orderlies, bringing empty stretchers, was marching down the pier. I had thought that the ship was emptied, so many men in khaki had passed down the gangway. But I saw, instead, that the work had but commenced.

YOUNG FACES WHITE WITH "THE EXTRAORDINARY CLEAR WHITE OF PAIN."

For from below they were carrying up other men. And these men lay quite still on the stretchers, with their gray blankets drawn close around them. Their faces were very white, that extraordinary clear white of pain. But sometimes when they were carried by they smiled. I think that there were men among these soldiers who had measured the hours of their journey by their own agony. Only suffering could have drawn such deep and searching lines, could have brought such shadings and such contours into men's faces. There was one boy who lay with his hands folded on his chest; his eyes were closed, and the shadow of his black lashes was no darker than the deep circles which furrowed his cheeks. There was neither life nor color in his flesh; his hands had the fine and delicate transparency of a child's hands. Yet, just as he was being carried by, he opened his eyes, made an inscrutable, almost imperceptible, movement with his fingers as if some impulse had impelled him to a gesture which must be unrealized. There was, for one swift instant, the illusion that he smiled.

Yes, there was courage enough among them, these men who were coming home. I marvelled at them; I had never thought of that particular degree of courage which lies in the one very simple fact that men—even those men who are coming back to England to die—come back home smiling.

And I marvelled more and more at these miracles of war when I went aboard the white ship and saw just what it meant, this long journey of the wounded. I saw all of the splendor of that big ship only as a background for the men who had returned in her. Yet certainly she was both beautiful and splendid. I was told that once in her history she had come into royal favor; be that as it may, whatever the purport of her destiny, she had been fashioned with true understanding. In the wide sweep of her decks, in the very lines and gradations of her, there was that character, that abiding character and personality, which is the inheritance of all good ships of the sea.

It may be that she suffered a little from a certain lavishness, not wholly judicious. For her cabins and her saloons were panelled in woods of many colors and many grains, inlaid according to the obscure ethics of such matters. Not that her fine frescos were not decorative, with their bright cubes and squares and quaint juxtapositions. They shone like satin; in the borders, golden and black, the green, brilliant hangings were mirrored, extraordinarily luminous and rich in texture.

But I liked best her big wards below. I liked their generous proportions and the clean, wide cots, row upon row of them. There was, too, that faint, pleasant odor of antiseptics and new linen. The copper sterilizers, set on shining tables, were resplendent in that cool and colorless interior. The enamelled basins and portable dressing stands were a brilliant and stainless white.

NOT A HOSPITAL-SHIP, BUT A SPOTLESS HOSPITAL ABOARD A SHIP.

But, above all, there was in this place a certain very fine and definitive individuality. I do not know that there were either details or designs in which it found expression. But indisputably this was a hospital on board a ship. It is true that above each cot, suspended, were two long canvas strips to which were attached a bar of wood, very much like a short trapeze. By means of this a patient could lift himself, so that, with his pillows behind him, he could sit up. Also, there were above certain cots strips of white cloth. These were fashioned like big slings, and they had been conceived by genius. For by the simple means of supporting a bandaged arm or a bandaged foot in them the vibration of the ship, the steady throbbing of her engines, was in a very great measure counteracted. But it was not in these things that the character of this white saloon was revealed. I think, instead, that it was concentrated in one quite simple thing. In this big ward there was but a faint, diffused light; for above the beds, and screening the portholes, was a long, unbroken sweep of green curtains, with black shadows marked in vertical lines. And these shadows, straight, deep bars on the green cloth, swayed a little, changed a little, widened and became narrow with a certain rhythmic, recurrent design. It was the movement of the ship. It was the inflowing and the outflowing of the tide.

Then I went up on deck, and there I was shown, that I might savor all the small attendant mysteries of the white ship, the officers' cabins and the staterooms for the nurses. These were, like the saloons, well designed, of good proportions. They were, too, inlaid with stained wood, richly patterned.

IT SEEMED CURIOUSLY UNLIKE A TRAIN, THIS RED CROSS SPECIAL FOR LONDON.

And I did not like to leave that ship. But a messenger had come aboard with the word that the train in which I was to go to London would start within five minutes. So I went with the captain and with the doctor who was in charge, and we walked along the platform beside the doctor's train, walked the full length of it, passing coach after coach, each with closed doors and a big scarlet cross painted between the blind windows. It seemed curiously unlike a train, this hospital.

At the door of the first compartment we stopped, and I bade the captain goodby and thanked him. He said something about hoping that I would not be too late in making London, and there was the conviction in his voice that it was, after all, somewhat of a journey that lay before me.

But to the captain the white ambulance trains and their safe passage to and fro were but just a part of the business of the day. While to me, in this momentous step by which I was to enter the forward compartment, I was achieving a new world. So many, many times I had watched the wounded train passing by, slowly, smoothly, with the clear, broad panels flashing in the sunlight. And I had wondered what mysterious, what grave and splendid facts of war, were concealed within that inscrutable interior.

"I'VE NEVER HAD A MAN DIE ON BOARD," SAID THE DOCTOR, "BUT——"

And I was to journey to London in one of those great white trains!

I stepped inside; and because the front of the carriage was two broad windows and because it was the first coach, I saw, framed in sills of dark wood, the black, square bulk of the engine, extraordinarily solid and imposing. Outside, on the platform, the doctor was standing with his hand on the frame of the opened door.

The engineer leaned out of his cab. The doctor turned, looked at him, nodded and said, "All right."

The engineer moved back in his seat. The doctor stepped into the compartment and closed the door. Thus, in the most casual and engaging fashion, the ceremony was completed. We were off.

I saw the concrete flooring of the pier moving past on either side and the columnar supports of the pier roof gliding by our windows. Through the open arched space between them I could see the sunlit water and the gray line of a wharf. Beyond, the tall masts of a ship rose very black against a brilliant and intensely blue sky.

There was in the compartment a curious impression of stillness, which I believe was due in great part to the very size of it. Certainly, it was quite the largest carriage I had ever seen. By the windows, placed on either side, were two big couches done in dark blue, with blue cushions; at the foot of one of them stood a square, closed desk, with a continental telephone above. There were also a table and swivelled armchairs, upholstered in gentian-colored cloth, with gold borders. A vase, filled with bright flowers, stood on the table; an opened book, turned face downward, had been left on the couch. And this was a compartment in a train.

"We have to do what we can with them," the doctor said, standing by the desk and turning over some papers. "We just about live in them, you know."

"This, of course," he explained, "is only a short trip, comparatively. Sometimes they are rather bad."

"Anything can happen, you know. Now, there was a man we had last night—we knew it was a serious case, yes. An amputation—only just got him off the train in time. There wasn't anything to be done. He died an hour after." The doctor sat in the corner of the couch, facing me, looking out of the window where the gray smoke from the engine whirled against it. "I've never had a man die on board," he said slowly. "But there are times"—— he hesitated, waited a little, then shook his head. "Yes, there are bad times," he murmured.

ZEPPELINS? BOMBS? QUITE A SIGHT TO SEE FROM A LOADED HOSPITAL TRAIN?

He leaned back, took up the book beside him, closed it and placed it on the desk. His khaki tunic and braided sleeves, with their three small stars, showed very dark against the gentian cushions. "It's the responsibility," he said, the even, meditative tone of his voice carrying quite clearly in the curious stillness, "and the uncertainty—the fact that you don't know. Anything can happen. . . .

"There was the night they stopped us and told us about the Zeppelins. . . . That was the second time my train had been bombed—there was another night, but that wasn't very bad. But this night the train was filled up, all cot cases, two amputations, possibility of hemorrhage. And what are you going to do? You have to get them to the hospitals. So we went ahead. . . .

"They were dropping them pretty thick that night—oh, yes, we saw it all right. Quite a thing to see, that!"

Then he smiled, that friendly Scotch doctor, smiled and fumbled with the black cord of his eyeglasses which had caught on the button of his shoulder strap. "Pretty show it would have been," he announced, with a certain gentle causticity, "if they had hit us."

Then he stood up abruptly, waited for a moment to look out the window where the broad fields were wheeling past in great squares of color, and said: "There are one or two serious cases to-night. We'll go back now."

THE ROOM IN WHICH IT IS DECIDED WHETHER MEN ARE TO LIVE OR TO DIE.

And he walked down and opened the door beside the closed desk. I saw before me a little narrow vestibule with mahogany walls. I stepped into this vestible, one short step carried me across the threshold; but in this moment I entered a wholly new world. It was, in absolute truth, a world complete, self-sustained; there was not even the illusion of its having any concern whatever with what was not contained within itself. It was war.

There were, in certain cupboards and certain little rooms opening off the corridor, bandages, gauze, linen, instruments, medicines. There was, too, a compartment of some proportions where a man at a typewriter was making up the nominal roll. Also, in this extraordinary world of war there was a kitchen; the cook asked me in to show me the generous pots of broth simmering on his stoves. But it was the dressing room, with its enamelled operating table and its brilliant overhead light, which was the axis of this compact and infinitely tidy little universe. It was in this room, this room built in a train, that it had been decided whether or not men were to live or die.

"Yes, it's a bit difficult—operating here," the doctor admitted. "What with the motion of the train and all." But he added hastily that it was not on board ambulance trains that the true miracles of science and of medicine had come. It was in the dressing stations, in the casualty clearing stations, in shabby little rooms under shell fire, where the light was a lamp or a candle or anything, where water itself was at a premium. "Nobody believed," the doctor said, "that surgeons could do what *they* have done."

Then we went down a very narrow corridor and, quite suddenly, I found that we had entered the first coach filled with wounded men. It was deep and narrow, with a white, concave roof. But it was above all a very long coach, and running the full length of it were two double tiers of cots. The aisle between these tiers was of good width and miraculously clean. The cots were wide, with thick mattresses.

In each one of these cots a man was lying. They were lying as if they were asleep, with their faces turned away from the light. The coach was very still.

THE DOCTOR TALKS OF THE AMAZING NEW DISEASES OF THIS WAR.

I walked down the aisle, following the doctor, I was afraid of the movement of the train throwing me against one of those white cots where those curious, inert, motionless things were. But the doctor was hurrying along quite briskly, and explaining to me the amazing new diseases of this war, talking in a low, veiled professional tone and looking at his patients each one, as we passed by.

"There's, of course, shell shocks," he said. "General collapse. Nerves simply give way—can't stand it. The wear and the strain, and the noise, the horror and the rest of it"——

"They come home like this"—— We had stopped by one of the cots where a man was lying with his face turned straight toward the light. His eyes were closed, his thin, nerveless hands lay, palms upward, on the gray blanket. The slender veins in his wrists showed very clear.

"He's been like that perhaps for days," the doctor said. "Doesn't see, doesn't hear, doesn't feel. Absolutely unconscious. Total collapse.

"Yes, oh, yes, he'll be all right. It's just time, you know. Time and care and patience. Like any other shock—only ten thousand times greater. It's wonderful to see how their memory comes back, slowly, slowly. . . . You wouldn't believe what man can live through. You wouldn't believe it—it's only flesh and bone, after all, you know.

"Then there's this thing of trench feet—pretty bad that. Slow rot. Wholly new disease. And for that matter, there are plenty of them—not yet even named, some of them. But, of course, it's mostly shrapnel. Shrapnel and amazing things." . . .

"TWO DAYS I 'AD," SAID A WOUNDED TOMMY, "TWO DAYS IN 'ELL."

And so, like this, we passed through coach after coach—ninety-five wounded men there were on board. And the doctor was stopping every few steps to look at a dressing or to ask a question. And I was walking behind him, filled with wonder and amazement. I had not known it was like this—the getting wounded men back from war. They were so patient and so pitiful and so happy. And I think that they, too, were sometimes filled with wonder.

For when I stopped to talk to them they said always that it was a miracle, a miracle being on that train.

"I never knew I was goin' to be 'ere," a Tommy told me. He was lying, both of his bandaged feet propped up at the foot of his cot. "They got me in both legs," he explained. "Fair an' square. Shrapnel. Two days I was lyin' out. Two days. No, you wouldn't believe—an' I wouldn't either, hadn't I done it. Frightful it was. H. E. spatterin' 'round everywhere. They were rippin' things open, them two days. Oh, I was sorter goin' out o' me mind toward the end of it. . . . Don't know where I'd got to—we was pushin' on. Down I went. Down I stayed. Wasn't no good tryin' to crawl. . . . Yes, I was a bit out o' me mind, thinkin' all sort-a things out there. Two days, an' a night of it thrown in. 'In the legs I'm 'it,' I said to meself. 'Wish they'd blowed off me arms. . . . *I'm* done,' I said. But I remember 'em gettin' me hout. Two days I'd 'ad. Two days in 'ell.

"Then I was put in a barn, full up it was, an' they went an' strafed that. Busted out a whole side of 'er. Saw 'er cavin' in—frightful noise. 'That's crocked up,' I said.

"An' now I'm 'ere—'ere in a train. It's 'eaven, I call it." . . .

Then there was another Tommy in another coach who talked to me. The doctor had gone ahead; it seemed that there was a bit of difficulty about an amputation case; the Sister had sent for him.

This Tommy, who was nineteen years old,

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