(*April 25th, 1916.*)

The Work of the Y.M.C.A. at the Front.

By Major Gerald Birks* and Rev. George Adam.*

AT the annual meeting of the Club, held on the 25th April the speakers were Major Gerald Birks, of Montreal, and Rev. George Adam, of London, Eng. Major Birks said:

Mr. Chairman and Gentlemen,—Like most of you here I am a business man, and I looked at things in the Old Land through a business man's eyes. Of course, as the Chairman has said, I went over there on Y. M. C. A. work, but I think I can frankly say my interest was not in the organization, but in the men that the organization was trying to serve. And as a preliminary, gentlemen, I can say, as a business man, this thing is good business. The Association is over there not to play, but to make better fighting men, to help keep our soldier boys fit. And I think, as I tell you the fine commendations that come to it from senior officers and so on, I believe you will agree with me that it is delivering the goods.

The problems we have to face are various and a little different in England and France. In England,—well, in plain English, it is mainly the moral problem. It is impossible on a public platform to more than touch on what our boys are up against in the camps in England. Getting a large number of men together, separating them from all those surroundings that they have been brought up in and accustomed to; all types of men,-under any conditions, creates serious conditions. In England, with the great influx of Belgian and French refugees, the problem is a tremendous one. And that is the biggest question the Association has to face and try to find a solution for in England. In France the problem is different: there it is the terrible monotony of the life. That term seems rather out of place when you think of front line trenches, but what our men are fighting there almost more than anything else, or rather have been fighting during the past six or seven

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months of comparatively quiet times, has been the terrible *ennui;* and anything that will bring them any relief, any little change in the monotonous round of rations—although it is the best fed army that ever went to war (applause)—still the soldiers find the rations a little monotonous, and any relief is a good thing. I remember, about three months ago now, standing on a hill three miles back of the firing line, discussing this phase with two Generals, one an officer in the artillery, and these two veterans spent three-quarters of an hour discussing the absolute need of the fighting men from the psychological point of view, and this organization through its change of rations is helping to meet that need. The rations are plain but plentiful, and ordinarily speaking that would seem sufficient, but you should see the way the boys go through the tins of pork and beans the Y. M. C. A. provides! (Laughter.) When the units went to France, the Y. M. C. A. did not think they would need to take their canteens along, but presently they found it necessary to send 150,000 tins of pork and beans over in January; then 200,000 tins in February. And the boys will buy them—two of them will buy together, dump the contents into a mess tin, pour a tin of golden syrup on top, stir it up, and there is a mess fit for a king! (Laughter.)

You know, the psychology of this thing is awfully interesting. Boys have been more or less a hobby of mine for years. Over and over again I am impressed with these big fighting men—what boys they are! It is the most natural thing in the world to see a bunch of boys cutting didoes over the table, smashing dishes, and almost in a flash turn and listen to a serious message. Well, with the soldiers it is almost the same thing. At an entertainment at Shorncliffe the last thing on the program was a hypnotist,—he had one of the men washing his head in a basin of flour; it seemed almost sacrilege to call on a parson after that, to bring a live message, but the boys took it well. There is no use putting a Bishop up, unless he is a man. But the men are always ready to listen to the deepest things of life, always ready to respond. —But I am getting off the track.

In England the work is very largely done in large huts. We plan to have at least one hut for every brigade of infantry, or its equivalent. In these we put on strong concert parties, one a week, professionals from London. First of all, the men like music. As for the result, as one O. C. said, you can judge from the crime sheet as to what type of concert the Y. M. C. A. put up the night before; in other words, the

boys would rather listen to good music than drink bad whiskey. Just take one program: Sunday morning, church parade—there's another fine thing, gentlemen, there is no denominationalism out there, no Roman Catholic or Protestant (applause)—that is all wiped off the slate. His Royal Highness said to me two weeks ago: "It reminds me of an incident in my own experience in Egypt: a Roman Catholic *padre* was wounded, with an Anglican *padre* on one side and a Presbyterian *padre* on the other he was helped from the field." His Excellency said: "When anything happens, we have got to get together!" Gentlemen, something has happened in Europe! We have *got* together! And it is up to the Church at home to get together and cut out all this dreadful waste, or I think, when these soldiers come home, these quarter of a million boys will do something to it! (Hear, hear.) There was a Roman Catholic service at 7, an Anglican at 8, a Presbyterian at 9, and in the afternoon a Jewish rabbi spoke. In the evening there is generally a sing-song, addressed by one of the chaplains or some one from London. Monday there was a concert by artists from London, Tuesday a free-for-all show, the boys themselves furnishing the chief part of the program, Wednesday a band concert, Thursday another entertainment, Friday a boxing concert, Saturday was free for letter writing. This is a sample week's program in an English hut; in France we have the same thing, on a smaller scale, naturally. And in three different stages at the different rests we are allowed to put huts or divisional marquees, although there are not many professional concert parties—although now even some of these are getting over. At the brigade rests, just back of the firing line, the huts are in dug-outs, though they are not dug-outs but sandbag huts, with good protection; there similar programs are carried out, in a small way, and the canteen is run twenty-four hours out of twenty-four, for the working parties come out of the trenches at all hours of the day and night, caked with mud, soaked to the skin, and they can find refreshment there. Our secretaries are now supplied with cinematograph machines, supplied by the War Contingent Association, and with gramophones. By the way, gentlemen, you don't know what a gramophone is: to men who have been in the trenches three or four, five or six days, a gramophone record, a fifty-cent record, being turned out on a $25 machine, beats any pipe organ you ever listened to! They are little things, but they are making a fundamental difference in men's lives!

To illustrate the way this thing is appreciated by the higher authorities,—in London, every newspaper that comes from

Canada in bulk is automatically dumped into the basement of our office; we have a staff of seven or eight, only one paid by the Government, but the British Army Post Office arranges that all newspaper are sorted by our staffman, and for instance Toronto papers are sent to Toronto battalions, as far as he can judge them. That is one indication of how our work is looked on by the authorities. In the Post Office, every letter that comes in for a man who can't be found, if his name is not found in the casualty lists it is automatically turned over to the Y. M. C. A. to look up.

The attitude of the Headquarters is, as the G. O. C. said to me, "Major Birks, anything you want for that work, all you have to do is to ask for it!" (Applause.)

In France we are allowed to have eighteen secretaries, six for each Division. We smuggled them over to start with,—The Canadian Generals smuggled them over. Afterwards a letter came from the War Office, saying that as it was very evident the Canadian authorities wished them there, and the men wished to have them there, the "irregularity of their presence shall be recognized." (Laughter.) We don't care how irregular it is, gentlemen, so long as they leave us alone. But now, with the approval from Headquarters, men from the ranks are detailed for that work, those who are active, not those who have rheumatism, but picked out, many as well qualified as our secretaries; and it is interesting, the nearer you get to the firing line, the greater the sympathy, the greater the enthusiasm that is shown for this work.

I remember, a couple of months ago, climbing over a hill, very frequently mentioned in the despatches nowadays, and we had to take shelter, for we were in sight of the enemy; at last we reached the hut—the ruins of an old stable—the Y. M. C. A. for the soldiers of our battalion. Near this I climbed down to a place very dimly lighted; I could just see, in the half darkness, a figure stretched out; the figure started to rise; I said to the officer, "It is a shame to disturb your rest." But he said, "Come in, there is no rest on the firing line," and pulled me down beside him. Presently I heard the buzz of a telephone, and he answered; I could tell that he was getting reports of just what the Bosches' shells were doing a few hundred yards down the line. In a few minutes the Brigadier-General came to get the reports, and I had to decamp; but as I was going, the officer said to me, "Remember, Birks, the Y. M. C. A. is the best soldier at the front." (Applause.)

I had not been in England a week till I saw and appreciated the good work that had been done. I thought that the Association had tremendous room for expansion. I started to figure out what amount of money would be required; I thought I was getting it pretty well worked up when I got it up to $100,000, but after being there longer, when I saw the men and their needs, I was convinced, gentlemen, that half a million, that a million dollars would not be too much! I am convinced, gentlemen, that these are times when money does not count! I am a business man, and know that sounds extravagant. But while I was there one of the men came to me and said, "Our coal issue is run out, and coal is $35 a ton. Will you authorize me to buy some at that price?" "Sure!" I said, and if he had said it was $100 a ton, I would have said "Sure" too! Just realize, the Y. M. C. A. stoves in that hut were the only place around where a man could dry out in. At times like that, gentlemen, money does not count! I got up to a quarter of a million, and did not dare go farther. But I asked a group of business men, consisting of Sir George Perley, Mr. Peacock, Mr. Cassels, and others, to meet me, and I put the matter before them. I said: "Here are the conditions, and the needs; I may be carried away with enthusiasm; I want to lay this before you, and I want you to tell me, have I a case to lay before the people of Canada?" Those men listened to me for two hours, and then they said: "Go ahead! You have a case!"

Gentlemen, this thing is worth while! As I have indicated, the work has to be done extravagantly. But remember one thing: this is a time when money does not count. This money is not being expended merely for the next few months, or for the period of the war. It is not only a present call, because, gentlemen, what our soldiers are, what these quarter million men are, when they come back to Canada, this country is going to be for generations to come!" (Applause.)

Rev. Mr. Adams said:

Mr. Chairman and Gentlemen,—I think it is something of an injustice to a man to be given an introduction like that, and then to be told that he has got to talk for ten minutes! (Laughter.)

We are all impressed on the other side by the optimism and loyalty of Canada. I experienced something of Canadian optimism and loyalty just when the war broke out. I arrived in Canada, at your northern port of Halifax, unexpectedly and

in haste, because of the unkindly attentions of the German cruiser Karlsruhe. (Laughter.) But arriving in Halifax, I was delighted to see a bulletin annoucing that seventeen German cruisers had been sunk, and six British ships slightly injured. (Laughter.) That, at the time, I put down to journalistic optimism. (Laughter.) Some people would characterize it otherwise, they would call it prophecy. Let us only hope it is prophecy soon to be realised.

The same day I saw a regiment of Highlanders marching along, led by a pipe band. Of course, being a Scot, my blood was stirred, and I marched along with them. Alongside of me I noticed a little black boy (laughter), as black as a boot; he was quite a little fellow. I was rather struck with his martial bearing, and I said to him: "Son, are you British?" "Why, sure!" he replied, "I am Scotch!" (Laughter and applause.) Naturally, I doubted it. (Laughter.) So I interrogated him as to his name; his reply was that his name was Macleod. (Laughter.) I thought it very odd to have such a name, but surely there must be a "cloud" somewhere. (Laughter.)

Well, that loyalty and that optimism has been amply demonstrated in the story of Canada's association with the Old Country in this war; and there is not a man, woman or child on the other side but would like me to say to you for them, "Thank you!"

Not long before I came away, in a little glen in the Highlands I was talking with an old lady whose son, a Canadian soldier, had been wounded. I had been talking to him in London, and was bearing his message to the mother in the Highlands. In conversation it came out that I was bound for Canada on this expedition, and she said to me, "Will you tell them over there we people over here love them with all our hearts!" And so they do. That little village in the Ochils. with less than three thousand souls up to the war,—mind you, that little village had earned three Victoria Crosses (applause)—wait a minute, gentlemen! I am not through—two D. C. M.'s and a D. S. O. (applause)—from less than three thousand souls! You Scotsmen in Canada, pull yourselves up! Think of what Scotland has done. There are a lot of you here! (Laughter.) I was looking for a name in your city directory, beginning with "M", and I wondered when in the name of goodness I was going to get through with the "Macs!" (Laughter.) That is good for the city, they help to make Canada! (Laughter.) That explains too why there is so much money in Toronto. (Laughter.) I feel there is very good reason to expect to get Toronto to do as much as all the rest of the Dominion together for the Y. M. C. A. work.

I was talking with some members of the British Government a few days before sailing, and they told me that I need have no fear of speaking too strongly for them. "We are overwhelmed almost," they said, "with admiration for what Canada is contributing in this war." Lloyd George,—who by the way is the hardiest annual in the Parliamentary garden (laughter), although the "Gardiner" does not seem to care for him very much (laughter),—wrote me, "Anything you may say about the Y. M. C. A. I will endorse." As for others. Mr. Asquith said, "The Y. M. C. A. is the greatest thing in Europe." From the highest to the lowest, the King, the Queen, all the people in high places socially, financially and governmentally, are up to the eyes in doing everything to aid its work.

Well, gentlemen, we love the Canadian boys, their fine strapping figures, their nut-brown faces, their glorious blue Canadian eyes! but they had a way with them we didn't quite understand (laughter), a colonial way, quite majestic, but difficult to understand in England. (Laughter.) Their complaints were loud and deep about such an old British institution as the weather; they didn't seem pleased with that at all. (Laughter.) I remember, one day, on Salisbury Plain, speaking to a soldier in one of the huts, he marvelled that there had not been a mobilization of ships and that all the people had not come to live in Canada, and let the Germans come over to Salisbury Plain and get drowned! (Laughter and applause.) We'll drown the beggars yet! (Hear, hear.) We'll drown them, and if the hope and resolve of the Allies is carried out, and it will be.

Your boys didn't only assail the weather and tickle us up about it, but even had the audacity to criticize us about our trains! (Laughter.) There is a man of the C. P. R. here. (Laughter.) One of your lads who had just returned from a furlough in London complained bitterly that he had spent five hours of his precious leave in getting back to camp. "It gave me plenty of time to think," he said, "and the thought that hit me most was that when the Lord made creeping things, it included the South-eastern Railway!" (Laughter.) Oh, gentlemen, the Canadian soldier does not suffer from lack of a sense of humor! (Laughter.) I am afraid of the caustic comment that might be made about the C. P. R. if I am not very careful, and about your Home and Colonial Railway, I think you call it,—more "home" than "colonial;" I came from Halifax

on it—and my thoughts were very much like those of the Canadian soldier. (Laughter.)

Like the Major, I have got off the track too! (Laughter.) I was to talk about the Y. M. C. A.—but, it is all of a piece! These boys are helped by the Y. M. C. A. It has given them hope, has lifted camp drudgery. You fellows at home, even those soldiers at home, don't know what it is like,—you always have association with your own people, your own home interest; but when your boys are away there, three thousand miles away, they are absolutely dependent upon some institution for arranging and organizing entertainment and comforts. The life is a hard one, the training is hard, the kits they have to bear on the marches are very heavy, and the marches are very long.

While the Canadians may be very democratic—the Imperial officers, I believe, thought they were too democratic—all that has disappeared, believe you me. The condition of the Canadians in England and France compares most favorably with the best Imperial traditions. When you see what these boys have to go through, you realize that the Y. M. C. A. has to be a competitor against the pavement lady and the public house, and neither of those things is desirable for young Canadian soldiers, removed from the influences of home and church and their own social life. The Y. M. C. A. is practically the only bulwark of morality and sobriety for the Canadian soldiers overseas. I say that not because I am any Y. M. C. A. man; I never was associated with a Y. M. C. A.—but whatever its faults may have been it has stepped into the breach and done a work positively wonderful! (Applause.) I can't describe it to you, I am not a man of many words, and my poverty of phrase makes it absolutely impossible to tell you. They really have done a wonderful work for our home, church and social community as well. And night after night, day after day, the whole Y. M. C. A. equipment has had one thought, one desire, spending itself in one enterprise and one only, helping the boys to hold hope in their heart, inspiring them to be good, in their living, and doing everything possible to bring these things to pass,—and you men ought to give to the point of sacrifice to a work of this kind!

We are very grateful for men like Major Birks, coming over at his own expense, spending his own time, at the risk of his health and life, to see that the Canadian boys get a fair show. He has whipped things up; and if he could succeed in getting the British War Office to recognize an irregularity

(laughter)—as the Canadian says, that is going some! (Laughter.)

My time is up. (Cries of "Go on.") Well, there are a whole lot of stories I would like to tell you of the work the Y.M.C.A. is doing. But you might think I was talking soft, forgetting that I was an old football player. The Y.M.C.A. officers you have sent over are all too few. You must send men. The work they are doing, companioning these boys, looking for those who are going to the devil quick, getting hold of them, counseling them. There is a magnificent record of moral cures among your Canadian sons over there to the credit of the Y.M.C.A! I saw one boy at one of the meetings, and he talked to me. He said, "I have got wrong, and I don't seem able to get right again. Night after night I go down town, intending to go straight, but am continually getting 'soused.'" I wondered what that meant—but he explaned. "I try to go straight," he said, "but try as I like I don't seem to be able." I tried to tell him about how when a man's life is gripped by the Spirit of Jesus Christ he is able to withstand in the evil day, to withstand temptation, and to carry right on through, with his colors flying and his head high. "I have been trying all I could," he replied, "but I feel like a man looking for a door in the dark." That boy was pulling at his very heart. Some time later he wrote me from a hospital, where men go who are not wounded in war. He said, "It has come to this; there seems to be nothing for me now, but to get as quickly better as I can and get to France and be a billet for a bullet." But a Y.M.C.A. man got busy on him,—kindly busy, graciously busy!—and gentlemen, that is one of the things I absolutely know, the Y.M.C.A. has been instrumental in straightening out that boy's life! That is one case; others could be added to it, not tens or twenties, not scores of fifties, not hundreds, but thousands, of boys who will come back here with clean lives, clear eyes, to look their women folk in the face, to look their wives and sweethearts in the eyes, because they have kept their pledges in this moral struggle, this life and death struggle, inspired by the influence generated, consolidated and organized in the Y.M.C.A.! (Applause.)

But it is not only for their time in the training camps and in the trenches but in the hospitals, the work they are doing is in the realm of the sublime. You know the intensely receptive condition of the patients as they lie there, pallid and passive, almost bled white by wounds, as the hours drag by on leaden wings, and the days are almost insupportable,—if

there were not those kindly little conversations at the bedside, or the good fun entertainments in the wards, recovery would not be so speedy nor the time passed so pleasantly as it is. Your Canadian nurses are magnificent, gentle, good and brave, and co-operating with them in their mighty task is that Y.M. C.A. Oh, sirs, your opportunity now is greater than you know! Help heal, help hearten, help hold, your soldier sons!" (Applause.)