

# ATLANTIC MONTHLY

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## **HAVE WE KEPT THE FAITH?**

WE are a pretty comfortable people. The farmers have their troubles, and some of us complain a good deal that labor is unreasonable. But profits and returns are high; there is food enough to eat what we can and to waste the rest, just as we have always done. We are building houses, comfortable ones, and the figures of our incomes are rising. Yes, we are pretty comfortable.

But as a people we are not happy. Am I wrong in thinking that our faces show it? Everyone is apt to be a little more excited than he was back in 1914, a little more nervous. Watch the crowds in the streets. There is more agitation and more unrest. We are impatient with the papers, which tell us all sorts of disagreeable things about the world. We are irritated with Europe, obstinately dilatory about putting her house in order.

Memories of the war crop up. We suppress them. Books and articles dealing with the war we simply won't buy. We have had quite enough of such unpleasantness. Yet we don't enjoy ourselves. Why is it, we wonder, that young men don't talk about their war experiences as their fathers always talked of what they did in the war between the States. The Legion even finds it hard to keep a full membership. And yet America did pretty well in the war. We were amateurs, but in a large way we did the business like professionals. Everybody who was 'over there' remembers that the American name stood high. We used to square our shoulders, not without satisfaction.

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Things are different now. If we are more comfortable, we are not so proud. It was seven years ago that we started out to save the world. Well, the world is not saved, and we have stopped working to save it. Something is wrong, and we cannot enjoy ourselves as we have every right to do. I think of these things, and I remember my own experiences — experiences of one among thousands.

I was attached to a Mobile Unit, a hospital which received nontransportable wounded, and was stationed as far forward as possible, to diminish the delay before operation. It was under canvas so that it could be moved along at short notice. We were in five campaigns with the American Army, and ended in Germany in the Army of Occupation. It was a wonderful experience, but one so horrible that up to now it has been difficult to talk of it. Of course we had the very worst side of the war, seeing it almost entirely from a hospital point of view and but rarely coming in contact with the slightly wounded.

During the battles there would be row upon row of men on stretchers, lying about waiting to be admitted, some unconscious, others in agony, and still others helpless, but willing to talk and joke. One day a division which was encamped in a near-by wood sent over a band to cheer up the wounded. A good many had just come in and were lying about everywhere on stretchers. They were all much cheered to hear the music, and one boy, his face and arm swathed in bandages, called to me, 'Say, Miss, can I have the next dance?' Another night, after a rush of wounded, I was walking about among them and noticed one who seemed in bad condition. I went to find a doctor to see if anything could be done, and when I

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came back the boy had died. Without struggle of any kind, he had just gone out; not even the boy lying beside him had known that he was dead. Alas, they did not all die like this!

Our first baptism of fire was on the night of July 14, 1918. We were attached to the Forty-second Division and about eight miles behind the lines. We had been warned that the Germans might possibly break through here, so we were all prepared to evacuate at a moment's notice. Shortly before midnight the barrage started in the distance, gradually getting nearer and nearer, and at twelve-ten the first shell whistled over our heads. It was thought to be gas at first, but, after a few minutes in gas masks, orders were sent around that there had been a mistake and masks were removed with much relief. We were ordered to the dug-outs, and all the men who were then in the hospital were carried down there on stretchers. After a short time the wounded began to come in, so we went up to the wards, and the operating-rooms started working at top speed.

The shock ward filled up rapidly with men who were in too serious a condition to be operated on. Their clothes had to be cut off, and they were given transfusions and infusions and in other ways resuscitated. Some of the men who were almost pulseless would react at once to heat alone. As there were no electric heaters, candles were rigged up in tin boxes and put under the beds. These, with the aid of hot-water bottles, would sometimes bring a man back when he appeared almost dead. They were terribly wounded, some of them delirious, groaning and shouting, and others would be put to bed only to die. The whole scene was a nightmare.

Meanwhile the shells were dropping

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nearer and nearer. While walking through a corridor I happened to look out just as a shell crashed in a near-by field. A great cloud of dirt was blown into the air, but no further damage was done. The next two fell in the hospital grounds, and by this time it was impossible to continue operating. Everyone was ordered to the dug-out and the wounded were carried down; but before they were all moved one of the wards was hit and two of the men were killed in their beds. The dug-out was so packed that it was almost impossible to find one's way about. There was a candle here and there, and some of us threaded our way among the men, giving morphine and helping them out in any possible way. One man showed me a large gash in his arm where he had just been hit up in the ward; his other wound was so much more severe that this was a mere scratch. Before morning two more men had died.

At seven o'clock we were ordered to evacuate the hospital, and it was a relief to breath the fresh air again. The wounded were sent back in ambulances, and the nurses and doctors followed in trucks. We went back to an evacuation hospital where we passed the next twenty-four hours, and then on a bit further where we set up our own hospital. As we were quite far behind the lines in this place, we did not have the desperately wounded, and it was a relief to see that there were some men only slightly injured, and not all in the desperate condition we had seen up to then. We had two young boys come in, who had circumvented the enlistment law; both were badly wounded. One of them remarked with a groan, 'If I had known how terrible it was, I sure never would have lied about my age. I guess there's no fun in this kind of

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war.' Another, who had been wounded in one eye and was in danger of losing the other, said, 'Well, I have seen enough of France, and I know what the folks back home look like, so what does it matter?'

We were in that spot for about a week and our orders came to move on. A train was to be at the little station near our hospital at midday, so, having no ambulance, we had to get the men there by loading their stretchers on trucks. They lay on their stretchers at the station platform all day without a sign of a train. In the evening more orders, to the effect that ambulances would be there sometime that night. There was nothing to do but cart them back, give them their supper, and put them to bed again. The next orders promised ambulances at midnight, so we cooked a large supply of cocoa, which was administered to the men preparatory to their departure. They left us in the early hours of the morning; their cheerfulness through all this trying day never left them for a minute; all one heard was appreciation of what we were trying to do for them, no grumbling as to why they were shipped about hither and yon, getting nowhere.

Our next move was to a little place not far from Château Thierry, called Lizy, where we were stationed in a large and hideous château. The hospital was set up on the grounds and the officers and nurses lived in the château. We received patients almost at once and, as before, most of them were seriously wounded. But the same courage was shown by these men as our previous experience had taught us to expect. Not only did they suffer from their wounds, but the flies came in swarms, and made life almost unbearable, particularly for the helpless men, who could not brush them away. We had no chaplain at that time and

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the adjutant, or sometimes another officer, had to hold the funeral services; it even fell to my lot to conduct it once, as the officers were so busy they could not get away.

One night we had six truck-loads of 'walking cases.' In addition to being wounded, many of them had not had a thing to eat for two or three days. All we could get for them was hot coffee and bread spread with oleo, but from the groans of joy one might have thought they had never tasted anything so delicious in their lives.

Our next camp was beside the wreck of a small town on the road to Fismes. A week before it had been the battlefield; now it was covered with 'duds,' tin hats, rifles, and all the débris of war. One day a young American boy was brought in, suffering from shock. He could hardly talk a word of English, but by the aid of one of our enlisted men he explained that he had been in No Man's Land for eleven days. There were four other men with him, they lived in a dug-out hoping that someone would come and carry them back to the lines. All were very badly wounded — this boy least; he was wounded in the knee and could pull himself about on his elbows and push with the good leg; in this way he went out and picked radishes and green apples from a neighboring field where happily he was able to find water as well. He stayed until all but one man had died, then he decided to make an effort to get somewhere. He left water and food with his friend, who was perfectly helpless, and started to crawl in the direction of what he hoped was the American trenches. By some lucky chance he got the right bearings and was welcomed back and sent on to our hospital. He gave instructions where to find the other boy, but we never

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heard any more about him.

As I walked about among the men up at him and said: 'That's just what finding out how they were and chatting with them, I was often greeted with answers like this: 'I'm getting on fine, batting about 800. Fritz only got a little piece of me. I lost a toe and got hit in the leg.' As a matter of fact this boy was hit almost everywhere, in the back, leg, foot, neck, and a few other places. The day after, in answer to my inquiries he said: 'I'm right in the major league now and no one can touch me.' It was talk such as that which kept us all going, no matter how unbearable it seemed at times.

We were next ordered to the Saint-Mihiel salient where we sat perched on a hillside for three weeks waiting for the offensive. It was slack times that were almost the hardest of all. When we were busy no one had time to think, and it was far better not to be able to wonder what it was all about. We had no patients in this offensive, as most of the wounded were sent to the other side of the salient.

Our next and last move during the war was to another château, this time in the Argonne. In this offensive we really began to learn what war was. We had a great many divisions in action and here our losses were heaviest. Although we had dimly appreciated the horrors of war, we had not up to now realized how indescribably terrible it could be. After each attack we would have load after load of desperately wounded, some of them dead before they arrived, others dying shortly afterward. At times, one's state of feeling was that it did not matter how the war ended so long as it ended that minute. One could not bear to have any more of these young, healthy men die with

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their lives ahead of them and their families at home to live for. The men, themselves, often did not realize they were dying; they thought they were just going to sleep, and would lose consciousness and quietly go out.

They suffered far less from the mental point of view than those at home. The families are in a constant state of wondering if their 'boys' are safe; if the boy is killed, how great their misery, not only for the loss of their dear one but from the haunting questions of, Where was he killed? Did he suffer? Was anyone with him when he died? Did he send any last messages? All these things naturally rush to a mother's mind. One boy said to me, 'That's the worst part of being wounded—'cause it's so hard for the folks at home.' The first thought that a man had was that his family should not worry. If it was suggested to him that he might write a word to his family, he would answer invariably, 'I don't want them to know, they would worry themselves sick.' When they realized their families would know in any case, they reluctantly allowed one to write and say they were only slightly wounded and would be well soon.

One boy said: 'Tell mother I had one eye shot away, but I can see with the other fine, and one ear was hit, but the other works all right, and my head aches pretty bad and my stomach is pretty sick, but otherwise I'm fine and don't worry, I'll be all right.' He was most appreciative of having the letter written and when it was over he said — to me: 'If there is something you want in the States, just tell mother 'cause I know she'd love to do something for you.' Other men desperately wounded would say: 'I've just got to get well. It would kill mother if any-



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thing happens to me.' We finally acquired a chaplain and one day he was reading the Bible to a boy who was hopelessly wounded; both legs had been amputated, and there was little hope of his recovery; the chaplain came to where 'the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep.' The boy looked up at him and said: 'That's just what I've done, have n't I, so my wife and kids will have a better place to live?'

Here is a letter from a mother whose son died in our hospital.

'Your kind and welcome letter received and was glad to have you write and tell me of my son's death. I had got the information from Washington, but thought there might be a mistake somewhere. But I am happy to think that I had a son to give, as I know he died for a good cause, and am glad to hear that he died bravely.'

Not only were the men's mothers imbued with the idea that their boys died for a great cause, but the whole family were proud to have someone to give for their country.

This next was from one of the men's sisters: 'Your letter of September 28 was received to-day by mother. She was glad to hear any word of Fred. She asked me to thank you for her. I take pleasure now in so doing, for Fred was a wonderful brother and man. His death was a hard blow to us all, but we know he died a glorious death for a most righteous cause.'

Many people scoff at the idea that we went to the war for anything but selfish purposes; but certainly many of the men felt that they were fighting for something higher, and their families backed them up. Here is one mother who, though she gave her only son, and was overcome with grief, yet felt that her son had died that the world might be better.

'Please accept my thanks for the

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kindness shown to my son. Would it be asking too much of you to try and find a picture of my only boy in uniform, and please write and tell me more about him in his last hours. Did he suffer much, and how was he wounded, and in what battle, and when the battle was? Miss Peabody, I am almost frantic with grief, for he was all the child I have. Of course, it was a noble cause that he gave his life for, but oh, if he could have lived to enjoy what he fought for; but he never did think of himself, it was always others. He told me he wanted to go over there to fight for freedom so it would be a fit place for our mothers and wives to live in. They celebrated the great news of Germany's surrender yesterday. While I am so sad, I could not help but be glad this world-wide war was over for the sake of other wives and mothers. . . . My sincerest thanks for what you have done for my only boy. I gave all.'

One young officer who was hopelessly wounded seemed to have no idea that he was dying. We knew that it would make his last hours terribly unhappy, so we did not tell him. As I was talking to him he said: 'I wrote a letter to my mother just before I went into the fight. I just told her what a good mother she had been to me, and now it won't have to be posted, because I'm going to get all right.'

Here is another typical letter from a mother: 'We received your most welcome letter from France, and we thank you one and all from our hearts for the information you have given concerning the death of . . . . I am glad and thank God he had such a quiet peaceful death. It is a very hard thing for a mother to realize and believe when she cannot be with him in his last moments, but still we hope to meet in another world and I am proud to give up my

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only boy to his country, and that alone is a great consolation.'

The officer who wrote this letter was brought in during the battle of the Argonne. He was suffering a great deal, but never a murmur or complaint to show his agony, and this might be said of almost all the men who came in. He was taken in to the resuscitation ward, as he was too sick to be operated on at once, and there he was treated, with hope that his condition might improve. He asked what his chances were of pulling through and he was told that they were a little against him. Everything that was done for him he appreciated, and he put up a great fight. He asked me if I would send this letter to his wife in case he died, and as he dictated this to me he said: 'We have been married only a year and a half, but we have been so wonderfully happy. I am so thankful even for that short time of happiness.' He was only twenty-one, and so full of health that we felt he could not and must not die; but when I went into the ward the next morning, his bed was empty, he had died in the early hours of the morning. Here is his letter: —

'My darling brave sweetheart, —

'Please don't worry about me, darling, because I am in good hands; I was hit this morning, and am now away down from the front in a nice warm bed. I am going to be operated on in a few minutes, and I feel fine. I have been hit by two pieces of shell, and the only thing is, it hurts a little bit once and a while. I was behind an American tank when some German shrapnel came overhead and got me in the chest. Darling, I make my hope all for the future happiness of us. Good-bye, God bless you.'

This is the answer I received from his wife: 'I cannot express in words my

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gratefulness to you for the letter you wrote me when my husband died. So many boys have left us and all we know is that they have died, but your kind letter is so comforting. I have so much to be thankful for, in just knowing he was in a warm bed, and just fell asleep.

'Your letter was the first notice I had received of his death. The last letter I got from him was written September twenty-sixth. He was then leaving for the front and he was wounded October fourth. All the time he has been there, in nearly every letter he has warned me of the chances but always reminded me that if anything should happen it would be for the best. But I have felt so sure he would be spared for Baby and me, and our little home. Now we know that he is n't very far away from us, and is just waiting for us to come to him. But oh! it's so lonesome when I think that he is n't coming home. . . . But for the note he dictated I'd have hopes of probably his death being a mistake; but his note was like his letters, always thinking of my happiness.'

Hundreds of thousands of us saw these horrors and worse. However we refuse to talk about them, however tightly we lock their remembrance in our breasts, they are not hidden from us. We are still shaken with that same vibration of the shock and hideousness of it all. We think of those who bravely died. We think, too, of our dead selves who once vowed that these others should not have died in vain. Can we, dare we, travel our smooth road farther and farther away from those great peoples of the earth whose companions we once were?