

Christian Teaching in the Brigade.

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I.

THE basis of all religious instruction in the B.B. must be the actual presentation of the picture of Christ. Our teaching will be powerful in helping our Boys to become good Christians, just in so far as we can succeed in making that picture live before them, in so far as by words and by example we can make them see Jesus Christ as One worthy to be loved and followed by them. To do this will require wisdom as well as good intentions. It is much that we shall realise Christ in a living way for ourselves; but we need also to study and think and pray as to the method by which we are to make Him living, real, and attractive to the average Boy with whom we have to deal. Of course no two Boys are quite alike, and a wise Officer will watch for all signs of individuality in each. But we have also to deal with our Boys as a body; and there is such a thing as normal Boy-nature. Our Boys have their points of resemblance to one another; they are of about the same age, they have had similar school training, and they come from, more or less, one type of English society.

Now it seems to me that there are certain sides of Our Lord's character which do not appeal naturally to the average Boy of this description. In this there need be nothing to shock or surprise us. If Jesus is the Pattern of Humanity, He must in some sort sum up the best elements both of man and of woman; and thus, whilst part of our growth in grace must be the growth in capacity to appreciate all the sides of His perfect Humanity, yet it must be obvious that men, and Boys the fathers of men, are more likely to be naturally and instinctively attracted by one side, whilst girls and women are more readily attracted by another side. However that may be as a theory, it certainly seems to me to be a fact that the average B.B. Boy is not predisposed to admire what we may call the passive virtues. He is pre-eminently a self-assertive person, and so does not see the beauty of meekness and humility. He is a worshipper of health and strength, and so does not appreciate the beauty of suffering. Courage, power, endurance, purposefulness, the active and robust qualities, these are what make up the average Boy's hero. I believe that, in presenting the picture of Christ to our Boys, we shall be well advised to start from a recognition of this fact. There is enough and to spare of these virile qualities in the life of Jesus. His defiance of danger, His resolution in face of suffering and unpopularity, His fearless handling of insincerity, His concentration of will and purpose, in these features of His character we have the perfection of exactly those virtues which a Boy looks for in a hero. Let us emphasise them if we want our Boys to see the supreme Hero in Christ. Of course we must not wholly neglect the other side, or else we shall present to our Boys but half a Christ, a man who might be taken as a pagan hero. We cannot show them a Christ who did not suffer pain and injury and scorn, who did not forgive His murderers, who was not meek and lowly in heart. Yet even these elements of His character are best presented to such Boys as ours as the revelation of Divine strength rather than of Divine tenderness; nor is such a presentation less true than the other. To take one crucial instance, the Passion of Jesus is the sublimest example of suffering and meekness and forgivingness; and yet it is just as truly the sublimest example of strength and fearlessness and endurance. We shall then act wisely to show it to our Boys as the supreme display of these qualities which they are naturally prone to admire, and leave it to a later time to teach them that it is also the supreme display of

other qualities, of which they will learn to see the beauty, when their powers of appreciation are wider.

Or again: the Christmas story, which appeals so strongly to young children of both sexes, needs to be re-told to appeal to our Boys. The beauty of the "baby Jesus" has ceased for the time to attract them; the attraction will probably revive for them later. But at present they need to be shown the wonderful miracle of Service, which the story as truly illustrates, and which they are much more ready to admire.

Once more, and to take a very fundamental point, is the average B.B. Boy instinctively disposed to appreciate the beauty of Love? In a shamefaced sort of way he still acknowledges to himself the beauty of his mother's love. But he hates to talk about it; he suspects all talk about love of any sort as being silly sentiment; and of sentiment he has a morbid horror. But, when he would be comparatively deaf to a tale of God's "love," and would sniff at any teaching that he should love others, as being girlish high-falutin', he will be fully responsive to an appeal to his generosity, he will like to hear of God's "willingness to help man," and he will have no contempt for teaching that he is to be ready to help others.

It seems indeed to me to be an essential principle in teaching Christianity to our Boys that we should present Jesus to them as the Man of Helpfulness, and Christianity as the Religion of Readiness to help. In Kingsley's "Two years ago" this conception is thus expounded: "That God is perfectly powerful because He is perfectly and infinitely of use; and perfectly good, because He delights utterly and always in being of use; and that, therefore, we can become like God, only in proportion as we become of use; that all life, all religion, all piety, are only worth anything, only Divine and Godlike and God-beloved, as they are means to that one end, to be of use." It may or may not be a complete summary of Christianity; I am not sure that I know of a better; but it strikes me as exactly the aspect of Christianity which it is most worth while for our Boys to learn, and which they will be most ready to appreciate and admire. A few suggestions as to the way of applying this idea in practice may be left to the following number of the *Gazette*.

The Boys' Brigade Hut at Rouen.

IN a former article I described the daily routine of the Hut, and I now propose to give some impressions of another side of the work.

The number of our Old Boys in the Camp for which we catered was not large, for our "division" included no Territorials and none of "Kitchener's Army." The Huts in the neighbouring Territorial Camps had a far larger proportion of former members of the Brigade among their clientele. We were set in the midst of "regulars" of the 1st and 2nd Battalions; and we found that the Three Years' Service Anchor, which, contrary to regulations, we wore in the button-hole, was recognised less readily in our own than in other Huts that we occasionally visited. During the last fortnight of my stay I gave lectures almost every evening in various Camps, some being half a dozen and more miles away, and no matter what the subject of the lecture might be—Gurkhas, Sikhs, or Pathans—I generally managed to drag in The Boys' Brigade, with the desired result that many Old Boys gathered around at the close to talk B.B. In most cases these lads were unable to visit our Hut, much as they would have liked to do so. What splendid, jolly, gentlemanly audiences those were in the Infantry, Cavalry, R.E., A.S.C., Motor Transport, Indian, Territorial, and Hospital Camps

With what cheery tolerance they responded when it became evident that I had paused for a laugh!

Still, hardly a day passed without the addition of a few signatures to the B.B. roll-book. It was good to welcome Old Boys of our own Companies back from the firing-line or just out from home; or the lads from other Companies whose Officers are our friends. The B.B. atmosphere and the renewal of old associations meant a deal to them, and during their stay the Hut became their own club-room. The brotherhood of the B.B., the friendships formed and cemented at Brigade Council Meetings between Officers from all parts of the kingdom, proved their value here. During the less busy periods, when handing a cup of tea, say, to a lad wearing the badge of the Blankshires, we would ask: "Do you come from A—, or B—, or C—," naming the chief towns of the county. "From C—, sir," might be the reply. We then mentioned some of the best-known Officers of the C— Battalion, and in many cases they would be recognised. A kind of introduction being thus effected, the lads would be only too happy to talk of their towns and homes, would appreciate the interest shown, and would be linked to the life of the Hut, so that they and their chums would henceforth spend all their spare time within its influence.

The conduct of the Camp appeared to be exemplary, and there can be no doubt that this was partly due to the same good influence. Here was a place to which they could resort; a friendly place in which they knew they were welcome, where chums could chat in groups, read the daily papers and magazines, play games, be entertained and help to entertain others at the sing-songs and concerts, and join in the services in an atmosphere that helped them to be true to their better selves.

A large proportion of the men of the "divisions" with which we dealt were there to recuperate after eight or ten months in the trenches. Most of these had been wounded or gassed, and some of them had been patched up and sent to the front twice or thrice already. They are the heroes of the hardest fighting in the most awful war of history, but they are in no wise aware of the fact. In the main they are just big children, happy-go-lucky, casual, confiding, and careless, quick at catch-phrase repartee, ever ready to grin at a jest, and the jokes and repartee are those we know so well in B.B. Camps. They are docile and amenable to an astonishing degree, and very anxious to please. If, being out of the particular kind of cake they ask for, we commend our nice penny cakes of soap, they are as likely as not to fall in with the suggestion through sheer amiability.

As one squeezes between the tables collecting empty mugs and bottles, the conversation overheard is practically free from anything to which the most fastidious might object. That all-pervasive adjective euphemistically printed as "bloomin'" was so infrequent that its occasional use in the canteen would give one quite a shock, as if it had slipped out in a Bible-Class at home. There was hardly an infantry regiment unrepresented in the Hut, and they were mainly gentlemen at heart. They felt that something was being done for their comfort and enjoyment by men and women whose guests, in a sense, they were, and they showed their appreciation.

There were, of course, some "hard nuts" among them. I recollect one in particular, a strong, rough, bullet-headed fellow who at a sing-song stuck needles through his cheeks, swallowed fire, and chewed up crockery, and at the close of his turn started to go round with his cap, but was balked of his desire. He was not popular with his tent-mates whom he bullied. "He's no class," his corporal informed me. "No manners, you know, sir." We struck up a kind of friendship, however, as I found he could be a good, hard worker if he chose. After vigorously

scrubbing the canteen floor one hot morning, he put on his jacket with a weary sigh and observed to one of the ladies who had just entered: "I say, miss, do you know any nice, kind-hearted young lady who'd adopt me as a pet, and take me home with her?"

Another man was always the last to leave at night. The concert-room would be left open after closing time, with some lights on, until the plants on the platform had been watered, and this chap stayed alone until the last door was bolted and the lights turned out. He had no chum; he rejected every advance, and seemed to resent all attempts at friendliness, rarely raising his eyes from the paper in response to a greeting. Poor chap! The man without a chum is in a bad way. We had opportunities of seeing how staunchly chums stand by one another in times of trouble. When bad news comes from home it is the chum who takes charge of the stricken man, bears part of the burden for him, and enlists sympathy, help, and advice on his behalf.

I have said that the men are merry, casual, and careless, but it must not be thought that what they have seen and done and endured has left no mark. One caught occasional glimpses in their eyes of deeper feeling. I believe that many of the men who worshipped with us there would not have entered into the services twelve months ago with the same intentness or sung the hymns with such earnestness. They had little to say of their experiences. Some were inarticulate, and some had seen very little though they had endured much. Generally speaking, there was an absence of rancour typical of the curious tolerance of the British soldier. But along with this absence of personal hatred there was a deep loathing of German brutality and a profound contempt for their entire lack of sportsmanship.

I shall never forget the intense seriousness of some 200 men who were listening one week-night to a talk by an Officer of the R.A.M.C. Drawn from at least twenty regiments they were of all grades and classes, Boys and middle-aged reservists breathing hard as some point struck home, their eyes fixed on the speaker with strained intentness. After the closing hymn many of them followed him to the "Quiet Room" to pray for strength and guidance. Men who had looked death in the face not once but many times, were little disposed to scoff at the quickening of latent religious feeling in themselves or others.

The superficial lightheartedness would be dropped by those men warned for medical inspection on the morrow, for they knew that they might form part of the next day's draft to the front. They would take out a treasured packet of letters from home and invite you to read them through. Frequently there were crosses at the bottom of the page to denote kisses "for dear daddy" from Johnny or Mary.

"Nine months I've been in the trenches, and this is the third time I've had to go back after being wounded. It don't hardly seem fair, sir, when so many young, unmarried chaps are playing at home and making better money because of us being out here."

"That's so," another would add. "This ought to be everybody's job, but as usual the willing ones has to work and suffer for the slackers."

It was only on such occasions that any bitterness was shown. For this reason it is not in my opinion desirable that the Officers who go out to work the Hut should be young men, unless they are disqualified for active service by poor eyesight or other obvious cause. The soldier is inclined to look askance at physically fit men, other than ministers, between the ages of 20 and 35. At the same time the work at the Hut demands a fair amount of strength and activity. With these qualifications the B.B. Officer of experience, with a knowledge of Camp life, is, I think, the ideal man to work a Hut in France or elsewhere.