



CHAPTER ELEVEN - WAR 1

Like the rest of our country, or indeed most of the world, our village has been severely shaken by the two world wars. Most of the soars are healed, but they will never be forgotten.

In the summer of 1914 a firm of public works contractors came into the district laying pipes underground to take telegraph and telephone wires. All the work was done by hand, which provided employment for quite a number of men, most of them strangers, and as this was before the days of easy travel practically all of them had to find lodgings as near their work as possible.

Many of the younger ones were Army and Navy reservists, and round about the August holiday week-end rumours and uneasiness were rampant. What with this and Bank holiday at hand, and the pubs open all day, the place was in a proper uproar, with drinking and singing and the one-legged dandey man working overtime with his barrel organ. This was Saturday and as everybody knows, on the following Monday war had been declared and the men on reserve did not come back to work on the pipe line. This was finished by the few elder ones left behind. It was some years before the wires were finally put into these pipes.

For some weeks posters had been displayed around the district advertising the visit of a famous German aviator and his aeroplane. There were still many who had not seen a flying machine, and they were disappointed, for he did not come.

Within a week of hostilities foreign tongues could be heard almost everywhere, for Belgian refugees were pouring into the country and also Belgian wounded soldiers.

Since the turn of the century the village has had the use of a large Church Institute, which comprises a large hall downstairs, a fair sized room upstairs, a kitchen and three committee rooms with a caretaker's cottage adjoining. These premises were easily converted into a V.A.D. hospital, staffed by young ladies of the

district, most of whom had never done hard work in their lives. But when this great emergency came they answered the call and did a fine job for nearly five years.

The first wounded brought there were Belgian and French. Everybody wanted to do something to help these men. The few motor car owners of that time brought the new casualties in from the station, and took turns in taking home and bring in the nursing staff. As time went on and supplies of petrol got short, allowances were made for these duties. In those far off days of motor cars there was no road tax and only voluntary insurance and so there was no outlay, only the things to make them go. Some of them, if they could not get enough petrol, had great big silk bags on top of them, charged with coal gas. When the charge was getting low they would blow and sway all over the place, and when they were full, if there happened to be a high wind, it was a difficult job to keep them on the road.

The Vicar was an early owner of a motor-bike and side car. His job for the hospital was laundry collection and delivery. A number of housewives did this between them. You would know when he was on this important job for he then wore a shining peaked cap with a red cross on it. At other times when using his rather clumsy locking machine, as was the fashion, he had an ordinary cap on the wrong way round.

The side car was a huge coach built affair, with a wooden platform on the back, and so with various bundles and baskets he was able to deal with quite a large load of washing, for it was a powerful machine, very low geared. I doubt if it could do thirty miles an hour but it served a useful purpose.

In the evenings, gardeners from the big houses had a rita when each undertook to find the vegetables for the days' needs as far as possible, after school some of the older boys would report for refuse duty, sometimes this operation would go wrong, if there happened to be bad weather, or there was some other attraction, then the caretaker would have to do it, but not often, for the lads were mostly keen to see what they could find in the way of soldiers' buttons and badges, cigarette cards and all sorts of odds and ends. One night I found a jack knife with the tip of the blade broken, but what a treasure, I wonder now if sometimes such extras were put in to encourage the boys to keep going.

As time went on and the Belgians got better, the intake gradually changed to men of the British, Canadian and Australian forces, and after the first battle of the Somme with its terrific casualty list, so many wounded were brought in that there was not room to get them all inside, and so beds were made in the yard in front of the building. A framework of scaffold poles was hastily constructed and covered with tarpaulins, but it was soon obvious that this

structure would have to be made more permanent, and a wooden building took its place, part of which is still there after forty odd years, still doing useful service as a store.

Of course no institution like this could go on for five years without romance creeping in, and several young ladies of the district found their life partners amongst the patients of this Voluntary Aid Detachment Hospital. In most cases it was the girl who left home and so they were scattered all over the country and Commonwealth. One unusual case was of a young soldier who as a boy had lived in the village and who on leaving school had gone to Canada, where at the outbreak of war had joined the Canadian Army. Later he was wounded in France and brought quite by chance back home, where he married a girl he had known at school, and this time he stopped here, for he was too badly wounded for further service.

There were no troops stationed in the village at all, but the town three miles away was full to overflowing most of the time, and hardly a day passed without some passing into or through the village, for mechanical transport was very much in its infancy in the British Army. Equipment was moved by horses which had been commandeered from almost every stable in the country, heavy cart and van horses for haulage and the lighter breeds for use of officers and cavalry.

The available supply from our own country soon got low and were replaced in large numbers by mules from abroad, and a new type of army rough riders were trained to handle these strong and often obstinate animals.

At this time radio was not playing a very big part and communication was by field telephons. Cable wagons, pulled by teams of four mules would come clattering through the village paying out rolls of covered wire, followed by men on horseback who with long-arm poles would hang it up on bushes and trees, where it crossed roads and gateways, another wagon loaded with light poles would deal with it, and here it would stay, sometimes for a few hours, sometimes for days or weeks and then back they would come and roll it all up again. This was usually a slower job for most often the drums were rolled up by hand.

Right in the middle of the village was a large open field, this was used for training the men for trench digging. Various units would come there for a course, marching out from the town in the morning and back again in the afternoon, mostly headed by a band, for in this war most troop movement was by foot and military music could be heard quite often. The most common were the bugle and fife and drum bands with sometimes the recognized band of wood wind and brass.

One Sunday I well remember over fifteen thousand men passed through, and in all they had twelve bands of different kinds to help them on their long tramp of seventeen miles with full pack, which I believe weighed over ninety pounds for each man to carry.

The only time that I ever played truant from school was to follow a contingent of the Liverpool Scottish who were on a route march led by bagpipes and followed up by a brass band. Three of us boys went off with them, one of whom lived some way from school and had brought food for his midday meal. This he shared out, and it was all that we had all day, and when we did get home we were tired right out, but we had had a wonderful day with a fine body of men and it was worth all the trouble we got into both at home and at school.

Very often after the soldiers had left what was generally known as the trench field, it was taken over by another "army". The boys for quite a long way round had never had such place for fun and mischief. Needless to say there were often casualties even in this army, slips in the mud causing bad falls and even one or two broken bones, but the most common ones were nasty smacks with mud balls, but what a place to let off spare energy.

Some of the measures introduced at this period have stayed with us ever since. One which affects everyone is "summer time". The idea of putting the clock forward one hour during the summer months was that of an Englishman William Willett, but his own country was one of the last to adopt it, and even then it was not universal. My father declared that it would not work. How could the cows give their milk an hour sooner? And fancy having to wait until after nine o'clock at night before you could shut up the chicken! such things were never meant to be, and besides, when you had dinner from noon till one you were resting when the sun was at its height, whereas by putting the clock on you had to start again on a full stomach just when the heat was greatest.

After a year or so these die-hards found that they were creating more problems than they were solving and slowly fell into line with other people.

The introduction of licensing hours I believe was generally welcomed especially by those in the trade, for it gave them time to keep their premises in order, and do other things, whereas in times past they were tied from early morning until late at night, and with certain customers the new act gave them time either to sleep or work off the after effects of over indulgence.

Both of these acts have been with us so long now we take them for granted and hardly ever think about them at all.

The following Tuesday was a nice bright day and someone had found enough firing to get up steam at the brickyard, which had been idle all through the war, and at 11 a.m. they let off the works whistle and let it go until it ran out of steam. This was how our village heard of the joyful news.

The next day nearly everybody had at least half-a-day holiday. At the big house where I worked there was another lad in the garden, a bit older than Ian, when we left off for our midday meal he asked the gardener if we were having the rest of the day off. The answer was "No, we have got too much to do". When we got along the road Charlie stopped and looked straight at me and said, "Look here! You're going to meet me at the Green at two o'clock and we are going to town. If you are not there I'll give you a jolly good hiding in the morning!". He was bigger than I was, so what was I to do? Listen to the old man, or to Charlie? In the end Charlie won.

What fun we had with the little ofneverthing available, for there was not much food, a few fireworks and it was surprising what had been found to build a bonfire on the common. I can still see in my mind's eye several pianos and an old carriage that went to swell the blaze, to say nothing of the black-out curtains and shutters which everybody had had just enough of.

We had walked the four miles into town in the afternoon, roamed around with the crowd until with many others we saw the last 'bus loaded to capacity go away without us, and so we had to walk again. We had not gone far on the road when someone started to play a mouth organ. Others were soon singing or whistling and although we were all tired the four miles soon slipped by.

The next morning I went to work in fear and trembling, wondering how the old man would greet us, but he met us just the same as usual and made no reference to the previous day at all.

Later in the day the gentleman from the big house came out. We did not see him very often for he was old and none too strong. He said that he was sorry that he had not seen us before we had our half-day holiday, but here was five shillings each for us to keep up the festivities. What money! for my wages were six shillings a week. I had plenty of pals while the cash lasted. A lad of fifteen would want five pounds now to do what I did with that five shillings.

So ended the greatest war the world had known at that time, to be followed by twenty one years of uneasy peace which finally broke down, and so started a second round, worse than the first, for this time everybody, men women and children were all in it.