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Behind the Barbed Wire

THE QUAKERS' SPLENDID WORK AT KNOCKALOE

Immense Quantities of Goods Made at the Camps

Prisoners Saved from Despair and Madness

A recent article in the "Examiner" re-told the story of the native Quakers who lived in the Isle of Man during the latter part of the seventeenth century, of the bitter, relentless persecution which the little band endured, of the constancy and meekness with which they upheld the principles of religious freedom. The present article will tell, practically for the first time, the story of another band of Quakers who settled in the Isle of Man during the period of the Great War, of the noble work in the cause of Christ and of their fellow-mortals which they performed among the German and Hungarian and Turkish prisoners kept captive at Knockaloe Camp for over four years, and of the potent influence which they exerted towards the reconciliation of the races during and after the terrible conflict which ranged over the greater part of the civilised world.

The story has been told once before, but it will nevertheless be new to almost every inhabitant of the country in which the acts now recorded took place. The source of this article is a small volume entitled "St. Stephen's House," compiled by Miss Anna Braithwaite Thomas on behalf of an "emergency committee" of the Society of Friends which was formed for the purpose of affording assistance to Germans, Austrians, and Hungarians resident in England during the war. The facts set forth in the book constitute a noble record; according to the recent testimony of a Quaker writer, this is one of the finest pieces of work done by the Friends during the past hundred years. And Manx folk will find it intensely interesting to learn

something of what happened behind the barbed wire, in that city of wooden huts whose occupants temporarily increased the Island's population by half. There were on the Isle of Man at that time, in short, considerably more men inside the barbed wire than outside it. Knockaloe was much the largest camp provided for the reception of civilian enemy aliens in the British Isles; it corresponded very closely to that other historic camp at Ruhleben, near Berlin. "Just as the name of the racecourse at Ruhleben became painfully familiar to most English folk during the war, so the name of a little farmhouse near Peel, in the Isle of Man, was to be heard on the lips of many thousands in Germany, as well as in sad homes in most of the large towns in England."

The Friends' Emergency Committee for the assistance of persons of alien birth resident in England, and plunged into distress by the outbreak of war, was formed in September, 1914, and its first printed appeal bore the names of many honoured leaders in religious and political life, beginning with that of the Archbishop of Canterbury. The movement had the approval and support of the Government from beginning to end. The work was begun, says Miss Thomas, "with the deliberate intention of obeying the commands of Christ in the treatment of one's enemies and it has met with a success which is out of proportion to the efforts put forth. If nothing had resulted but our own hearts being kept soft and tender during these terrible years, and comforted in sore trial by the continual sense of God's guidance, many of us would have been amply repaid; but in addition we had the joy of constantly seeing wrongs righted, tears wiped away, desolate homes made bright, and sad-eyed little children won back to smiles and gladness. After the war, came the discovery that the work of the committee, as it became known in Germany, had kept alive the belief in the power of goodwill, and the possibility of a better world."

KNOCKALOE AND RUHLEBEN.

The offices of the committee were in

ate in St. Stephen's House, a building on the Westminster Embankment, near Scotland Yard—hence the title of the book. The first task which the committee set themselves was that of bringing financial aid to the homes of Germans, Austrians, Hungarians, and other enemy aliens who had been cast out of employment because of the war, and of making themselves friends and counsellors to Germans—we shall henceforth use that name to designate enemy aliens of all nationalities—who were only in England temporarily, and had been caught unawares. Originally, the greater part of the committee's energies were expended upon women and children—sometimes the British wives, and British born children, of Germans—but as the policy of internment of civilian aliens was adopted and developed, the care of the imprisoned men became a very important branch of the work, and several chapters in this book deal wholly with the subject of the internment camps. One chapter—

written by Mr W. R. Hughes—is specifically entitled "Knockaloe and Ruhleben."

The Friends' Emergency Committee scattered their seeds of kindness in all the internment camps, civilian and military, which were established up and down the country, but their sympathies were gained at a very early stage by the prisoners in Knockaloe. Knockaloe, as Mr Hughes says, was by far the largest of the camps for civilians; it contained most of the poor men; and it was far away, so that the men could not receive visits from their wives and children. To crown all, a very doleful report was received from the committee's "travelling visitor" who saw the camp in its initial stage. As is confirmed by Mr B. E. Sargeant, Government Secretary of the Isle of Man, in his book entitled "The Isle of Man and the Great War," men were arriving before the camp was complete; and so sanitation was bad, huts were leaky and unwarmed, and all was wet, muddy, and miserable—for the two or three miles of track formed of railway sleepers, which was laid subsequently had not then begun to appear. These conditions were speedily remedied as the camp took proper shape and completeness, and testimony is given to the spirit of

Humanity which characterised the administration at Knockaloe—Mr Hughes reproduces a very kindly and gentlemanly letter sent to the prisoners at Xmas, 1916, by the late Col. Panzera, then commandant in charge—but inevitably a life of captivity is a very dreary one. These men, as is remarked, were shut out of the world for over four years; they were separated from their families, and torn away from all their former occupations and interests in life; and the perpetual inactivity and aimlessness of their existence reacted on the brain and on the spirit.

"BARBED WIRE DISEASE."

Mr Hughes expresses the situation thus:—

"The condition of mind resulting from long internment was a dangerous one, and many of the prisoners were in constant dread of losing their reason. Although the number of complete mental breakdowns was less than had been feared, an abnormal condition of mind and of nerves was very prevalent. This condition has been labelled 'barbed wire disease' by the medical men of Europe, and the term found its way into our official documents during the war. Dr. A. E. Vischer, a Swiss doctor who worked officially in both English and German camps, has published a brochure entitled 'Barbed Wire Disease.'

Mr Sargeant, by the way, states that the amount of barbed wire used in the construction of the Knockaloe Camp was 695 miles, while 72 miles of wiring was used in connection with the electricity installation. Readers will well remember that the glare of Knockaloe Camp at night could be seen in many parts of the Island, and could be seen twenty miles out at sea.

"THE INTEREST THAT PRESERVES THE SOUL."

The remedy for such a mental malady is, of course, healthy occupation, of a character such as to engross a man's thoughts and maintain his self-respect. Without such occupation, as Mr Sargeant remarks, the prisoners were in considerable danger of falling into habits of gambling and other vices more repre-

hensible still. A proportion of them were therefore employed in agriculture, roadmaking, and so on; but it is the crown of the Quaker committee's labours that they provided this remedy for thousands and thousands of men in the British internment camps in general, and at Knockaloe in particular. One of their workers, Mr James T. Baily, who was by profession a teacher of handicrafts, visited Knockaloe during his summer vacation in 1915, and he offered the committee his full-time services, and obtained his temporary release from the education authority with whom he had been employed. He was given the title of industrial adviser to the committee, and later on, when the Manx Government accepted the responsibility for supervising this department, as well as the others, of the camp activities, he was formally appointed the Government's industrial superintendent. Finally the staff was increased to five men, four of whom brought their families to live in Peel.

In each of the twenty-three compounds, the Government had built a large hut, to serve as a dining hall. But the prisoners were allowed to feed in individual huts, in order that these halls might be used for social purposes. Most of the halls were divided, the larger part being used for meetings, concerts, orchestral performances, and plays, and the smaller part being set apart as a workshop. In these workshops, and in various other corners of the camp, the Friends' Emergency Committee, as represented by Mr Baily and his helpers, operated their organisation for training the prisoners in the exercise of handicrafts. The regular method adopted in all the camps was that the committee supplied to a responsible committee of the prisoners themselves the initial equipment of workshop tools and benches, and a standing credit in the form of a supply of timber and other necessary material, which credit was repaid out of the price of the articles when they were sold. The value of the materials supplied to a camp at one time sometimes reached as high as £1,000.

THE KIND OF GOODS MADE IN THE CAMPS.

Not a few Manx residents will have seen specimens of the useful and ornamental articles manufactured by the German prisoners in both the Douglas and Knockaloe camps. In the Douglas camp, it should be explained, the work was organised by the commandant and officers themselves; an outstanding illustration was the brush factory at Castle Hill. At Knockaloe, "there were, for example, dainty little animals of all kinds, made from cuttlefish moulds, filled with melted 'silver paper,' which children were set to work to collect all over the country. And oh, how we tired of boxes and bones! Boxes of every size, shape, colour, and design arrived endlessly; innumerable shinbones of beef were transformed into elaborately-carved vases, or cut into sections and fashioned into napkin rings. At the other end of the scale, there were most intricate carvings and mechanical models, and private orders were beautifully executed, even to the extent of several suites of furniture Amongst some of the occupations thus provided were the making of dolls' wigs, the construction of some of the Montessori educational material, and the assembling and painting of small model ships and railway trains. The most considerable amount of work, however, was provided for the watch-makers, of whom there were a large number in camp, and the basket makers. There were only three skilled basket-makers to be found, but these were used as instructors for others, and finally a hundred men were kept busy in turning out baskets of every size and shape."

THE "THREE LEGS" IN HAMBURG STOCKINGS!

"There were studios for the artists, and corners for jewellers, workers in metal, leather, raffia, and other materials. In one compound would be a book-binder's shop; in another a lithographic or steel engraving press; another room was full of knitting machines, chiefly busy in making socks for the prisoners themselves, either of new wool or from the unravelled material of the old undarnables. There exists to-day in Hamburg a firm of ex-Knockaloe men, which does a big business in making new stock-

ings out of old, and bears as its trademark the Three Legs of Man—stockinged proper!"

The internees were also employed to make boots, hosiery, etc., for the German women and children who were daily being relieved from the committee's headquarters at St. Stephen's House; they made bed-tables, leg-rests, crutches, walking-sticks with rubber tips, etc., for the camp hospitals; and Dr. Markel, the head of a central organisation which supplied comforts to the camps in all countries, obtained a large stock of tooth-brushes made with the help of an ingenious machine devised by an engineer interned at Knockaloe.

KNOCKALOE GOODS SOLD ALL OVER THE WORLD.

The disposal of the immense amount of commodities created by the industry of the war prisoners greatly taxed the committee's energy and ingenuity. Some of the goods, notably articles of clothing, were utilised in the camp itself; but the conditions on which the goods were allowed to be sent out of the camp were that they should not be publicly advertised for sale, and should not be disposed of to any manufacturer or shopkeeper—in plain words, that this employing of aliens should not throw British workers out of employment. Many articles were disposed of in America, through the assistance of a Prisoners of War Relief Committee formed in New York; the late Crown Princess of Sweden interested herself ardently in this cause, and organised exhibitions and sales in Stockholm and Gothenburg; and one consignment was even sold—thanks to a mistake in transport—in the Prussian House of Lords! Before the camps closed over £20,000 worth of the men's handicraft had been sold by the Emergency Committee.

GERMAN PRISONERS HELP TO RE-CONSTRUCT FRENCH HOMES.

But the finest story of all is how the peace-loving and peace-practising Quakers were able to enlist the German prisoners in the work of reconstructing the devastated homes of Northern France,

A workshop was set up, and material acquired, and the prisoners laboured with a willing and understanding co-operation, for the purpose of making furniture which dispossessed French peasants might use in the new homes built to replace those destroyed during military operations. These homes themselves, admittedly of a temporary nature, were erected by the Friends' War Victims Relief Committee working in France, and at the time this book was published, about 150 kitchen tables, with some dozens of dressers and cupboards, were being used in French homes as the result of the work of Germans who had been interned at Knockaloe. Unhappily, this noble practical proof of reconciliation was only begun in the final year of the war.

A similar work was done elsewhere than among the male aliens confined in the camps, and large quantities of clothing were produced for the benefit of refugees driven almost destitute of clothing from French homes. "These German tailors," comments Mr Malcolm Quin, another contributor to this book, "were now employed by one of the enemies of Germany in rendering services to another enemy, so that the singular and moving spectacle was afforded of three combatant countries which were at that moment carrying on an awful enterprise of slaughter and destruction one against another, comrades in a work of goodwill and succour."

THE GERMANS WERE DOING THE
SAME FOR OUR MEN.

REPRISALS OF KINDNESS, AS WELL
AS HATRED.

"Methods of goodwill," says Miss Thomas, "like those of hatred, produce reprisals of their own kind. The services rendered to prisoners in England were found to have called forth kindness to prisoners in Germany. The wife of a doctor interned in England, because of what she heard of the help given to him and his comrades in camp, formed a committee of her own in Germany to help imprisoned men; and the men in a British camp, having received much

assistance by gifts of books for their library, scattered over Germany a request to their friends to do the like for the German camps. It seems fairly certain that one effect of the work of the Friends' Emergency Committee among interned aliens and prisoners of war was to benefit men in the internment camps in Germany to a greater extent than could have been done by any direct means that were open to us."—The committee give an instance of how an Arts and Science Union formed among the British prisoners at Ruhleben received numerous gifts or loans of material, including valuable scientific apparatus and technical books, from some of the best-known scientists and scientific firms in Germany. A committee similar to this very committee formed by the Friends was set up in Berlin, and a constant correspondence was maintained between the two.

WERE BRITISH PRISONERS ILL-
TREATED IN GERMANY?

AN ILLUSTRATION OF WAR
'PROPAGANDA.'

An illuminating passage in the book reads as follows:—

"The people of every country during the war were taught to believe that they were treating their prisoners of war with the greatest humanity, while their enemies were using prisoners with the utmost cruelty. The purpose of such teaching was, of course, to arouse the fighting spirit. This reason is well illustrated by the story told us by an American Y.M.C.A. worker amongst prisoners. He had been in the camps of Russian prisoners in Germany, and after his investigations there he had prepared a booklet showing pictures of the brighter side of camp life, and of what the Y.M.C.A. was doing among the prisoners. After this he travelled to Russia, and in an interview with the Russian Minister of War, showed him the booklet, and asked leave to distribute it, for the comfort of Russian relatives of prisoners. 'How many of those things have you got?'

asked the general, 'and where are they?' 'I have so many thousand at my hotel.' The general rang for an orderly and gave him instructions. Then, turning to the American, he said, 'I will keep this copy; I have just sent a man to destroy all the others: that is just the sort of information which we do not wish our people to obtain!'

MUCH DEPENDED ON THE COMMANDANT.

"It is true," admits Mr Hughes, "that our country has much to be proud of in its record of dealing with prisoners, which is cleaner, so far as we can judge, than that of any other European belligerent country. To the honourable and gentlemanly attitude of our authorities and officers, and their desire to play fair in this part of the game of war, we can testify from intimate knowledge. But the same desire to play fair, makes us also bound to say at once that the same good spirit was shown, on the whole, in the administration of the German camp system. We have always been impressed by the similarity of the stories told by interned men on both sides. If the commandant of the camp chanced to be a hard and unsympathetic man, the life of the prisoners was made more miserable than it would otherwise have been; and the same is true of the influence of junior officers or sergeants of the guard. The difference between the two countries in this respect is that the personal equation in England only meant harsh discipline and the lack of privileges; in Germany the brutal militarism had produced men who went to far greater lengths of repression and cruelty. But it must always be remembered that brutality was the exception, and not the rule.

THE SUPPLY OF FOOD TO BRITISH PRISONERS.

THE GERMANS HADN'T GOT IT TO GIVE.

"The other notable difference between the countries," continues Mr Hughes, "was in the matter of food. The official supplies of food to prisoners in Germany were often only just sufficient to maintain physical life—thus being mainly

due to the actual shortage of food in the country. We hardly realise yet what difficulties in feeding itself the German nation went through, particularly in 1917; and we could hardly expect the people to give prisoners more than they had themselves. The position of the British prisoners, as a whole, became easier as the war went on, owing to the great supplies of food sent in parcels from this country. The position of the Russian and Serbian prisoners, who received no such parcels, was far more pitiable." Part of the duties of the German relief committee already described was to furnish food parcels to prisoners in German camps who had received none from home.

We have quoted sufficiently to show that the book is full of interest to Manx people, and to humane and Christian people the world over. It is illustrated, by the way, with several photographs taken at Knockaloe. The book is obtainable from the Friends' Bookshop, 140, Bishopsgate, London, E.C. 2, at the price of five shillings, with an extra ninepence to defray postage.
