

A SOLDIERS' TEA-PARTY.

I ARRIVED at the door just as two or three motor-loads of soldiers drew up. It was, I think, the saddest sight I have ever seen, that stream of young men and boys moving with difficulty along the wide passage. They were all dressed alike, in the blue-grey hospital garb ; and they were all broken : crutches, slings, bandages ; pale faces, slow and awkward movements. Some were well enough to be already thoroughly enjoying the outing, and there were happy grins which reminded one of an English village-tea. Others were shy and proportionately solemn ; and some were in too much pain to think of anything but the distance to the nearest chair.

There was no time to spend in pity. We watched the seemingly endless train of guests streaming in, and pleasure that so many had responded to the invitation gave place to an uneasiness which rapidly degenerated into horrid anxiety lest there might not be food for so mighty a mob. When we had gathered in one hundred more chairs, and seated just double the number invited, we stood aghast at the problem before us. However it was solved in a manner which proved entirely satisfactory. We doled out the provisions as far as they would go ; then came an interval for music, during which kind friends brought in fresh stocks of cakes, of tea, of sugar, of cigarettes.

The waiting at table had, of course, been breathless ; and as we struggled through the packed hall with cups and dishes, there was not an instant to attend to anything but the strictest business. The tables were rapidly cleared of all food, and little was heard but the clink of crockery.

One appalling moment I had, when, as I was hurrying along with a trayful of empty plates, a youth,—who ought to make his way in the world,—said in a firm, determined voice, "I'll take a piece of cake, Miss. . . ." That sounded all right ; but well I know that it was up to me to provide the piece of cake which he would take. I replied, "I'll get you some," with a brave voice, and a sinking heart.

Mounting some steps which commanded a view of the hall, I gazed hopelessly down on a vista of crumb-strewn tables. I retreated in despair to an anteroom where the hostesses were clustered together waiting for more material. Joy ! a little table had been set in a corner to accommodate some late comers, and on it stood a plate containing two pieces of cake. With an uncontradictable, "You won't be wanting this, will you ?" I carried it off in triumph. My hungry friend received it with a stony "Thank you." I verily believe he did it on purpose.

Then the music began. Excellent music such as all men love. (The exceptions prove the rule), and well-known songs with choruses. For a moment I was disappointed. I did want to talk to them. The town was seething with wounded soldiers ; everyone was hearing their experiences ; and I had never spoken to one. However, one learnt, or imagined, a great deal by watching their faces as they listened.

I did hear their experiences too, between the pieces. The three men nearest me needed very little provocation to tell me the whole story of their battles and their wounds.

The first was a shop-assistant: the kind with his hair parted in the middle. That was why I ventured to speak to him. I suppose a wounded man does not trouble to part his hair in the middle unless he does want to be talked to. He told me of the Church Choir he had sung in, of the Y. M. C. A. work he had done, of how he himself had sung in a concert for wounded soldiers this time last year, of how, since then, he had visited Ur of the Chaldees, had been shot through the chest, and left wounded in the trenches long enough to develope valvular heart-disease.

Then a Harry Lauder song loosened the tongue of an Edinburgh boy who seemed to have been on almost every fighting-front,—France, Egypt, Gallipoli and the Gulf.

Cockney accent and Scotch gave way to the thickest Lancashire when a collier from St. Helen's began to explain to me that the reason why he was getting so tired was that he had strained the muscles of his back, as well as other damage. His was a very sad story, for his young wife and little boy had both died in England since he had left home.

Towards the end the soldiers themselves were asked to sing. My chorister friend was longing to, but had to consider his wound. Some did, and were tremendously applauded. We waitresses kept our attention as closely as possible on the ices, cold drinks, cakes, etc., which were being handed round during this time. I am assured that the Tommies had chosen their songs most carefully,—as calculated to please the ladies in their audience. Well, well!

At length "The last song," was announced. There was a perceptible lengthening of faces. "Why the last song?" somebody asked. The officer in charge had said it, and there was an end.

ON PASSING THROUGH THE WATERS.

By M. A. C.

THE passing of our great warrior-statesman, Lord Kitchener, has struck a chord of grief and love in the hearts of the nation such as no other isolated event of the European War has done. We look to our poets to clothe with adequate expression the thoughts which are too deep for words as we muse on the final scene in the life of our national hero.

One can imagine our "strong man," going out in the fulness of his vigour and usefulness to be confronted by that fierce, relentless aspect of Death