

AT CAMP MEADE DURING THE EPIDEMIC

REPORT OF THE REV. GEO. W. DAME, D.D.

Civilian Chaplain.

ON September 23rd the Bishop of Maryland delegated me to report at the Epiphany House, Odenton, Md., to assist the Rev. Benjamin N. Bird in the work there and at the Base Hospital at Camp Meade. Two or three days after my arrival the Rev. Mr. Bird was stricken with the influenza and was persuaded to go to his home in Pennsylvania. Already the scourge was assuming ugly proportions at Camp Meade, and the Rev. James M. Magruder, D.D., a member of Epiphany House staff and acting chaplain of the Base Hospital, was being overwrought there. Whereupon I went to his assistance, daily visiting the wards which rapidly filled with stricken men.

The doctors and nurses in white robes and masks, realizing that the evil day was breaking, buckled down to their livid tasks of saving men with the grim determination and persistent courage that will justify a grateful country in according them a prominent place in the temple of fame. For two weeks or more influenza victims came pouring into the base hospital, and the accommodations of the wards were stretched to their utmost capacity, many other places being also used as temporary quarters for the sick. Night and day, nurses, doctors, and chaplains toiled unceasingly. Four nurses, one doctor, and one chaplain gave their lives in this great task of ministering to the sick, and the toll of dead reached to 800 men, who made the supreme sacrifice for their country. Those who remained fought on undaunted by the dangers and the fate of their comrades.

Several times I went over to the Red Cross recreation hall, where were gathered many sorrowful groups of people waiting to see the last of their boys alive, or to learn where they could get possession of their beloved dead. I stood before the fireplace and held short services and addressed them in words appropriate to the occasion. Never before was the old story of the Resurrection told to more willing ears. One old gentleman tottered up to me after one of these services and said in a very tearful voice: "I have been preaching the message of consolation to broken hearts for fifty-five years, but it never sounded so eloquent as it did to-day—because I needed it myself. I am waiting here to take my only son's body to my home."

In this maelstrom of sickness and death, I was struck by two things deserving attention which should greatly comfort the friends of the soldiers in their scattered homes. One was the loving and efficient service rendered to the sick soldiers by the doctors and nurses. The best from both orders were at the hospital here, and they rendered a willing and untiring service to the sick and dying, as if they realized that the young men away from their loved ones must have such care and attention that afterwards no absent mothers should have cause to reproach the hospital.

When the plague lifted and the young men grew better, I had many of them express their heartfelt appreciation of the doctors, nurses, and chaplains; and also many expressed their desire to get back home, meaning their regiment. Each day the two members of the staff went through the wards saying words of comfort and holding short services with the men, not even taking the precaution to wear a mask, but trusting in the Lord.

The other thing that was very noticeable was the hungry and eager way in which the soldiers welcomed these ministrations of the clergy who stood at their bedsides. It evidenced the existence to a surprising degree of a deep religious instinct in our young men of this land. One of them said to me: "The clergy are our best friends here. They come and bring our churches to our bedsides. They write our letters home or make us do it when we are strong enough. We boys love to have them come."

That is the way they talked all over the hospital. Besides the daily visitation to the wards, several of the clergy meet every Wednesday evening at 6:30 in the chaplain's office, and, dividing up the wards, take about six, and hold short services in each one, calling in all the convalescents from the porches. Several of the men told me it reminded them of home and a yesterday of long ago when they used to kneel at the home fireside and repeat the Lord's Prayer.