

Toc H (Talbot House).

FEW of the legacies bequeathed by the Great War to this generation are of a positive kind, but Toc H is one of them.

In a small town in Flanders, in a single house of that town, the Spirit of God inspired a man to make an experiment in human and divine fellowship, wherein was forged, under the hammerings of circumstance, a new family whose bond was creative love. From this household in Talbot House, Poperinghe, has grown Toc H as we know it, with members in every continent endeavouring to preserve in a world-wide family the finest characteristics of that earlier friendship. To-day the larger proportion of its membership is too young to have known Active Service, but the spirit and purpose of the first days has not been lost, this younger generation seeking to preserve and give it new expression in the different conditions of the post-war years. Toc H has endeavoured to define its inspiration, aim and practice in what is known as the "Main Resolution" as embodied in the Royal Charter, and by it, as a standard, Toc H must always be prepared to be judged. It reads as follows:—

"Remembering with gratitude how God used the Old House to bring home to multitudes of men that behind the ebb and flow of things temporal stand the eternal realities, and to send them forth strengthened to fight at all costs for the setting up of His Kingdom upon earth; we pledge ourselves to strive:—

"To listen now and always for the voice of God;

"To know His will revealed in Christ and to do it fearlessly, reckoning nothing of the world's opinion or its successes for ourselves or this our family; and towards this end;

"To think fairly, to love widely, to witness humbly, to build bravely."

The four principles of the last paragraph, which are sometimes expressed as Fairmindedness, Fellowship, Service and the Kingdom of God, constitute the "four points of the Toc H Compass," which are the guiding principles of membership of the Family.

The facts most commonly known concerning Toc H are firstly that it started in the war years, secondly that it has something to do with the lighting of lamps, and thirdly that it has secured the interest and support of the Prince of Wales—all of which facts are true but inadequate. To appreciate at all the meaning and purpose of this great fellowship which has caught the imagination of thousands of men and has before it tremendous possibilities, it is necessary to recall that fact of actual experience from which it had its beginning, when Talbot House was the answer provoked by a real need.

Poperinghe was a little Belgian town some six miles west of Ypres through which passed the vast majority of the troops going up to the Salient—a salient which enshrines for ever the meaning of sacrifice, in that there rest there to-day the bodies of some 254,000 of our countrymen, over a quarter of our total casualties in the war. To the soldier going up to the front line Poperinghe was the last outpost of civilisation. Beyond was the shell-scarred road, the blasted trees of the canal, the ruins of Ypres with its death traps at Hell-Fire and Shrapnel Corners, and beyond, the mud of the Salient itself. To the troops returning from the trenches Poperinghe indicated rest with comparative safety and the enjoyment that such amenities as shops and cinemas and the sight of civilian clothes afforded. Hundreds of thousands of troops were quartered in and around the town, and during the four years 1914-1918 nearly every division of the British Army contributed to its population at one time or other.

Here, in the winter of 1915, a Church of England Padre—the Rev. P. B. Clayton—opened a Rest House outside which was hung a sign reading “Everyman’s Club, 1915-?” and which received the name Talbot House. (Hence “Toc H,” the signallers’ method of saying “T.H.,” the initial letters of Talbot House.) It was so named after Gilbert Talbot, a son of Bishop Talbot, of Winchester, who was killed at Hooge on July 30th of that year. Like many other such houses, Talbot House provided for the elementary needs of the troops; refreshments, writing materials, literature and a lounge where sing-songs and many interesting debates were held. But there was a difference. “Tubby,” as the Padre was affectionately called, had set his heart on making Talbot House something of a “home-from-home,” with the little human touches so often lacking in the ordinary rest huts. Thus in the Old House carpets covered the floors, paper decorated the walls, flowers and pictures suggested comfort, and to the soldier coming in from a muddy, shell-shattered landscape, the large walled garden was a perfect haven of rest and peace. Thousands of men visited Talbot

House, and amid the laughter and chatter of good comradeship managed for a while to forget the war without. Here was no place for the man who wouldn't cheer up, or thought he was the only man for whom the world was all wrong, and a notice board with a hand pointing to the door by which he had come in, and inscribed "Pessimists' Way Out," brought a first smile to many a weary man. The family spirit required the encouragement of each other.

The life and soul of the place was the Padre. Always with something that wanted doing he made a man feel that he had a share in the house because he was set to mend chairs, trim lights, hang pictures, arrange debates and the hundred and one things that were part of the life of such a house. Over the door of his room hung the motto—"All rank abandon ye who enter here"—and one of the unique features of Talbot House was the way in which both officers and men shared the common fellowship. Here "Tubby" revealed himself as friend and adviser to a constant succession of men, and led many for the first time into the little chapel at the top of the house. This "Upper Room" was originally a hop loft, high up between the rafters and stretching the whole length of the house. A carpenter's bench found derelict in the garden was carried up to serve as an altar—delightful symbolism—while furniture and hangings lent, or fashioned at the hands of the many passing friends of the house, quickly decorated that loft as a chapel. Here many shared their first Communion, many hundreds their last. Approached by steep, rickety steps, it welcomed many who came rather shyly, and sent them away with new courage, hope and faith. Somehow Talbot House achieved its object and became a veritable wayside inn, characterised by its good fellowship, and of which the unseen host was the Spirit of God.

With the end of the war Talbot House in Poperinghe ceased to be, its purpose was accomplished, and Tubby, with others, returned home. But the years of "reconstruction" were not easy ones; men were learning with much bitterness that you cannot turn the world upside down for four years and expect it to regain its balance in a day. There were neither homes, work nor security: life was almost as uncertain in peace as it had been in war, and men hungered for the fellowship they had known in the ranks. There was so little that anyone could do, but "Tubby" had to do something, so he took a little three-roomed flat in Red Lion Square, and collecting a few of the old comrades of Ypres together, he set up Talbot House again in London. One who knew those early days of the new Talbot House says,

"We went up the stairs feeling that in the midst of all

this confusion here was something fixed, something we all knew about, something jolly, something that had a hold about it. Once up those stairs you could find men who had got back into their old jobs, others who had discovered no jobs at all since the war and were getting very troubled about it. There, night after night, you would find that crowd of people again, a curious mixture, sitting on the chairs and on the floor—"Tubby," the worst dressed of them all in his old flannel trousers and blue blazer, and his collar only kept on at the back with a paper clip. And he would tell funny stories, and would recite passages from John Bunyan, which he knew by heart, and he would say also other things which were given him by God to say; sometimes they were humorous things, but they were eternal truth."

That was how, in a shabby back street in London, Talbot House started again.

Men want laughter and the courage of good fellowship. The flat in Red Lion Square quickly became too small, and Tubby moved to Kensington. With an amazing rapidity the family grew; a second and then a third house had to be taken. Because it offered what men needed it appeared in other towns too, Manchester, Cheltenham, Cambridge. The same characteristics—one family, where master and servant met on an equality, the binding factor being a common manhood, a sharing alike in the struggle to make something worth while of life. Where men didn't live together under the same roof, little groups of them gathered week by week to discuss, help each other, and to give themselves in various forms of service for those around them. There are now some 1,000 Units of Toc H scattered round the world. Young men and old, of every shade of opinion, representing every kind of profession and labour; a veritable human zoo, all endeavouring to be true to the ideals of the family whose head is Christ.

The methods of organisation—the machinery of so large a movement—can only be cursorily surveyed here. With the exception of Toc H, Australia, which is an autonomous body, the whole movement is controlled from a London Headquarters at 47, Francis Street, Westminster, but by steady process of decentralisation the areas into which Toc H is divided are securing to themselves more independent control. A certain number of whole-time men, working, according to an essential principle in Toc H, in pairs—a layman and a Padre together—serve the movement as a whole. The purpose of the staff is merely to guide and advise, to secure co-operation between branches and to maintain some sort of unity of policy and outlook

throughout the family. The life of the family is in the individual unit, of which there are three stages of growth. Two or three members of Toc H who decide to form a Toc H Branch in any district commence by getting together at frequent intervals and surveying the neighbourhood, and endeavouring to interest one or two others in their project. This stage is known as groping. When this has been going on for some little while and there seems every reason to believe that a real family can be maintained, the "Grove" receives official recognition as a "Group" and enters upon its probationary period preparatory to its promotion to full "Branch" status. This probationary period may be of several years' duration, thus securing, as far as is possible, that when the local unit shall have reached its full status as a Branch it shall really have identified itself with the ideals of Toc H. In the same way the individual desirous of joining Toc H has first to serve a period of probation before becoming a full member.

Every person joining Toc H is required to assent to the "Four Points of the Compass," as set out in the Main Resolution, and is pledged to give what time he can to the voluntary service of his fellows. Each Unit has as one of its officers a Jobmaster, whose business it is to direct the energies of members into useful channels of voluntary service, finding, as far as possible, the job most suited to the man. By this means Toc H is harnessing and utilising the strength of thousands of young men, much of which would otherwise be often wasted, either from lack of direction or because they had not previously been aware of its need.

Wherever there is a Toc H Unit there is a little coterie of men busy helping those in distress, such as the prisoner, the boy just out of gaol, the bedridden, the blind, the aged; leading the coming generation, as Scout Masters and Cadet Officers; running boys' clubs and any other activity that may be useful. The practical expression of the good fellowship found in a Toc H gathering is the service of our neighbour. In one of the back seats is usually to be found the Padre. Each Unit has its Padre; he is there as the guide, philosopher and friend of the members, exerting his influence to help the branch as a whole, and using the many opportunities that come to him of speaking of Christian things to men who are often church-shy. The man who can find the time from his church work to serve as a Branch Padre is doing a most valuable piece of work for the movement, for Toc H is at root a Christian and spiritual adventure—and none the less is this so where it is least talked of—and with him rests the responsibility and privilege of guarding this truth.

As a description of Toc H, what it is and how it works, the foregoing is very inadequate, the only real answer to such questions must always be an invitation to come and see for oneself. The great facts that have to be realised are that here is a movement which in twelve years has grown from a mere handful to some 40,000 members; (160 new Units have sprung up during the last year alone, bringing the totals to 706 Units in the British Isles, and 295 overseas); that this rapidity of increase shows every prospect of continuing; and that the membership is composed of men representing all social classes and opinions, anxious to do something useful in life, who find a powerful impetus to self-consecration in the simple ceremony of "Light," when, week by week, round the lighted lamp members think of those who would have been doing big things to-day if they had come back from Flanders. It is the realisation that Toc H to-day is not a mere society of men but a growing movement, gathering to itself others as it goes on, that brings home a sense of responsibility to those who have at heart the spiritual well-being of men.

Though some may query its necessity and others its methods, the outstanding feature is that Toc H has "caught on" and is charged with tremendous forces for creative self-sacrifice. Encouraged and guided by the right leaders and in the right quarters it surely has great possibilities before it. Neglected, or opposed because its methods of working are sometimes unconventional, a fine opportunity may be lost. At the moment Toc H is still predominantly Anglican both in character and numbers—partly because in its early days its leaders were all members of the Church of England, and to-day the Anglican clergy are only too eager, where time permits, to assist the Movement; and partly because, for various reasons, Free Church support has been slow in coming. The movement as a whole is desirous of full co-operation with the Free Churches from which nearly twenty-five per cent. of its present membership is drawn, and last year the first whole-time Baptist Padre was appointed to the staff. The fear has sometimes been expressed that Toc H might suggest itself to men as a substitute for the Church—as setting up a religion of its own. A movement of this kind must inevitably face such a danger, but Toc H endeavours to guard against it. It is contrary to its expressed principles to arrange Toc H services on a Sunday, and further it is fully recognised that every member contributes best to the fellowship as a whole as he is loyal to his own section of the Church Universal. The effect of membership in Toc H should be to strengthen a man in his sense of responsibility to his own Church. There is a real opportunity and need for

the Free Churches to take an active share in the development of one of the great movements among men in this generation.

To attempt to adjudge the significance of Toc H is as yet premature; to glimpse its possibilities is not so difficult. In that it affects the lives of many hundreds of men and is sending them to their work with high ideals and ennobled desires, it cannot fail to be having its influence upon a much larger circle than its actual membership, and to be assisting in the formation of public opinion. It is influencing many who are attracted to its fellowship but who otherwise refuse the guidance of the Church, while by admitting members at the age of sixteen it can do much to help those who drift at that age from our Sunday Schools and often away from Christian influence. By its emphasis upon service, and its demand upon the time and energies of its members in voluntary work, it deepens for many the sense of responsibility towards the less fortunate neighbour, and encourages the ideals of true citizenship. Within its circles, where caste and creed do not divide, a growing understanding of each other's point of view may go far in paving the way for closer co-operation both in society and in religion; while not the least valuable of its assets is its world-wide character and its opportunities for developing that mutual trust so indispensable to peace.

As yet Toc H is true to its character of a movement as compared with a society; a distinction urged upon the Central Council by the Founder Padre this May, when he pointed out that wherever circumstances direct all the energies of a movement in upon its own membership a movement "dies and becomes entombed in a society." "A movement," he said, "is a stream with origin and destiny, a society is a still pool of social persons. The true test of a movement is its influence on those outside its membership." Toc H must be regarded as an experiment in practical religion—free to explore and to develop. If, as was urged by the Bishop of Croydon, the Church, instead of attempting to seize and control—as it has so often done in the past—will exert its influence within and through the movement as it finds it, it may well discover that it has secured a valuable servant in its ministry to men.

J. R. LEWIS.