

## War-Time Jobs.

IT all began when things were very dull early last year. We were at war, but nothing seemed to happen. Stalemate was the word of the moment. There was the upheaval caused by evacuation and the inconvenience of the blackout and a feeling of uneasiness about making any plans. We wondered what might happen in the Spring.

What could I do with my holiday in such a year? I heard of someone going off to Hungary for the Society of Friends. There were literally thousands of people who were homeless and starving. Hungary had admitted these refugees, but with the coming of winter, a particularly severe one at that, conditions were wretched and appalling. I was comfortably recovering from sciatica at the time; I had hours and hours of quiet for reading, the family to wait on me, and a warm room to laze in. Then I longed to be able to do something for the refugees. Surely with a month's holiday and some money I could be useful. When I came to considering it in prayer I had to face the thought that perhaps I was hankering for an adventure more than really desiring to help people. Would I want to do as much if the work were in London? T. S. Eliot voiced my feelings:

Herein lies the greatest treason  
To do the right thing for the wrong reason.

It is one thing to want to help and quite another to find an outlet. It proved to be surprisingly difficult, so much so that I began to excuse myself from pursuing the task. All sorts of doubts rose in my mind. Then I thought of Maurice Rowntree, and remembered a talk he had given just prior to the outbreak of war. He had been a persistent visitor to Germany, a link between free and oppressed Christians. I found his address in the telephone directory and wrote to him, and was soon in touch with the right people. Maurice Rowntree was one of the sponsors of a committee set up to organise aid for all nationalities of refugees.

At that time the refugees were mainly Germans and Austrians, with a sprinkling of Czechoslovaks and Poles. After the invasion of the Low Countries when thousands of Belgian and Dutch refugees came to London special large scale arrangements were made by the Government for them, but naturally some came into contact with the many voluntary committees already set up. One interesting thing was to see Germans taking Belgians under their wing, helping them to find their way about London, and spending hours teaching them English.

I arranged with the secretary of the committee the dates I should take for my holiday. He himself was giving every minute of his spare time to the work. Each evening from six until ten there was a constant stream of visitors; people in trouble, often in the depths of despair, came for advice and help. Many who had made last minute escapes from Germany were finding it impossible to carry on here any longer. The feeling of relief at escaping Nazi terrors proved insufficient to live on indefinitely. They needed something to live for and something to do. A helping hand was not enough; the hand of friendship was necessary.

The main object of the Committee was to do away with the refugee class by merging them into the life of the nation. Slowly and gradually this must happen, but to save the process being unnecessarily painful, some definite steps were taken to ease the situation. Quite obviously, as I learned more about the work, it was impossible to sit quietly waiting until my holiday before helping. I joined a group of people working in my district, an offshoot of the main central group, and soon was drawn into the fray. At the outset, the Secretary had said, "Be sure you want to be in on this, because once its tentacles get you there is no escape." He was quite right.

The local group grew up and prospered in its work because one man was a Christian in action. He was so keen and gave himself so wholeheartedly to the work that people who were vaguely interested found themselves swept into it by his enthusiasm. Through his efforts a council was formed of representatives from the Free Churches of the district and from the International Friendship League, the Youth Hostels Association, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and the Synagogue.

This council acted as a clearing house, and through their respective bodies did their best to meet all requirements for help and social contacts. The help was mainly friendship and personal interest and not financial aid, as this was looked after by the case-working Committees at Bloomsbury House. About 60 refugees for this district alone were offered friendship.

The first job given to me was to visit an Austrian girl who was lonely and without friends. I wondered how I could be of any use. To put into practice something I felt strongly about was not so easy when the time came actually to do it. Friendship grows, I thought. I cannot arrive at a stranger's door and expect by some magical means to find it there waiting for me. I can well remember my misgivings as I knocked at the door. To my surprise I was given a warm welcome. I remember that we talked solidly for two hours about many things. I learned that in Vienna she had had a very good post as foreign

correspondent to an insurance firm and could speak four languages. She had travelled a good deal during holidays and could tell me about climbing mountains and ski trips; this was a real joy to me. Now, in England, in domestic service, parted from her family and friends she was lonely. Her parents had remained in Vienna, and her only brother was in New York. They were truly a scattered family.

We drew her into our circle of friends, at first by inviting her to join a small party of Germans and English who met regularly once a week. These meetings were in a private house and this had many advantages. There was the feeling of being admitted to a family circle and a happy fellowship where everyone aired views and opinions to their hearts' content. Now there are four homes, at least, where my Austrian friend is always welcome, and the circle will undoubtedly continue to grow.

After the collapse of France there was a general round up of aliens, and the refugees' lot became very hard. In many cases husbands and wives had been classified separately (enemy aliens are classified A, B or C by judgment of a tribunal) so that a husband classified as B was interned when the decree for that class was given, whilst his wife in the C class was not. I was asked to call and see some of the women left behind. From none of those I saw was there ever a murmur against us for cutting into their private lives and splitting up families again, not even when loved ones had been sent without warning as far away as Australia.

For some the burden was very heavy in those summer months; news, after partings, was so long in coming through, sometimes it was two months before the first letter arrived. One German lady told me how she and her doctor husband used to have their own nursing home in Germany. Amongst their patients were famous personalities, some being English. The time came to surrender it all, but it was not possible for them to leave Germany together; in order to get away they had to come separately. After bearing a separation of nine months, and after many trials they were finally united in this country. Here life was very different; they could no longer serve the community, but they were so thankful to be in England and together again. Unfortunately he was in the B class and just one year short of the age limit, and one day he was interned. She was afraid for him; it was weeks before she heard anything, and she wondered if his health would stand the additional strain. I shall never forget her telling me her story, and seeing her face lined with care and her expressive eyes heavy with sorrow. Yet she was not overcome; there was a vigour about her and a spirit which could rise above it. She ended by saying that her trouble was

unimportant if considered in its right perspective along with all the trouble in the world. I remember walking home on air afterwards, thrilled to have heard her talk, and to see her fine courage.

The work I actually did during my holiday was very varied. For three weeks I went daily to a refugee hostel in Paddington which the central group ran primarily for the many who needed a temporary home. It was a port of storm for numbers of people. They came there to recover when, down on their luck, or when they had nowhere else to go, and usually passed on when something else opened up for them.

The hostel was run by a committee of men and women who felt called to give their time to the work. Again, they were Christians in action. Various denominations were represented, amongst them being Friends and a Christian Scientist. Their standards were very high, and always an inspiration. Many more, like myself (about fifty people) who were interested became known as the "Friends of the Hostel." They gave, amongst other things, money, flowers for beautifying the shabby old house, furniture, books and their talents. One lady came twice a week unfailingly to teach English. She understood idiomatic German and could give really useful, helpful talks to the German guests. Nothing was too much trouble for her. I felt very humbled when I heard of some of her activities. On one occasion she had tirelessly toured the district, looking for a cheap room for two of the hostel refugees. One was eventually found and arrangements made for them to move in. She wanted them to have good impressions to start with. She knew how strange they would feel in the new surroundings, rather lonely perhaps. The room needed heating; there was no gas fire and the landlady could not spare any coal. As none could be bought in time she filled a rucksack with some of her own, and carrying it on her back, cycled almost three miles with it.

Others I met taught me much. Everyone gave unselfishly, and not only material things. Sympathy, understanding, spiritual comfort were always flowing forth. Distrust minds were healed and life made liveable again. Here was a job for believers, for those with a rock-like faith. It was a chance to give for Christ, and only those certain of His power to help could stand the constant strain, the continual pull upon their spiritual resources. On the first day at the hostel I was asked to do accounts—my own work! The next day I was greeted with the words, "You have to try and get into such and such an internment camp to-day without a pass, see the Commandant and find out where a certain lost passport can be found." The owner of the pass-

port had been moved from one camp to another, his papers taken from him and apparently dispersed. His visa for America had come through, but all final arrangements were held up until the passport could be traced. If I could get inside the camp, there was just a chance that something definite could be found out. Prepaid telegrams to the camps had been tried, but no replies received. Every refugee who could afford it sent prepaid telegrams, so it is not surprising that nothing came of them.

I found the camp not far from the station. Nothing could be easier to find; from quite a distance away the masses of barbed wire were obvious. Groups of soldiers were standing about by the gates, and the place had a well-guarded look about it. I asked if that was the way in and they kindly directed me to another entrance further up the lane. Here were more soldiers, also very kind. I explained that I wanted to see the Commandant, and one of them offered to take me. This seemed too easy, and I wondered if it could be true. On the other side of the lane stood a large country house, and we walked down the garden path through flower beds a riot of colour. The next person I had to get past was the sergeant, and this was not so easy. I remember I felt very sorry for him, he looked so embarrassed and obviously disliked the idea of refusing to admit me, but disliked more the fact that I had no appointment. Of course I could not give in. I thought of the poor man waiting in an internment camp for the one thing which would get him out; and of his wife, in London by special permission from the police, specially to seek aid from our committee.

The Commandant was not very pleased to see me, but I tried to placate him by saying to him the very things he wanted to say to me. Whatever he thought, it worked and I got the information I wanted. He also told me that it was most unsatisfactory for him to live outside the camp; people began to arrive by nine in the morning to see him; on the very next day he was moving inside the camp, leaving the lovely old house and old-world garden. There nobody could get to him without a pass.

Another experience I had was in a London prison, now used as an internment camp for women. This time I had a pass, but it was not my own. The facts of the case were sufficiently important for me to take the risk. The internee had lost a valuable pawn ticket worth about £100, and by our law a new one can be issued providing the owner signs that she has not sold the original. The date of expiration was almost due, and there was nobody with an entry to the prison who could get there in time to get the form signed. The value of the

ticket comprised all the worldly wealth of the prisoner; she had brought out all her money from Germany in the form of a valuable emerald ring.

I had some uneasy moments; it seemed so wrong to be walking through the prison at the heels of an unsuspecting warder, having answered to some other name. After going through a series of doors, unlocked and carefully locked again, crossing a courtyard and entering still another door, I was asked if I really wanted to see Mrs. S. I agreed and on we went. The prisoner, excited at having a visitor, had watched from the window to see who it was, and of course said she did not know me. The faces of the two wardresses showed their puzzlement, especially as I greeted the prisoner as if we had met before. By this time we were well inside the interview room. Then one wardress challenged me—"Aren't you Mrs. H.?" and I said, "No, does it matter? Mrs. H. could not come." She looked nonplussed and uncertain what to do about it, so our interview continued. Before leaving, the wardress told me that an officer should have been present, but he was busy. I could not help feeling glad that he was.

I was sorry when my holiday came to an end. Not only had it been an unusual experience for me but also very worthwhile. It will be long before I forget some of the people with whom I talked on the easier, quieter days, and although they were always grateful for a listener they could not have been more pleased than I was to have a chance to help. As many avenues of employment are now opened to refugees happier days have come for them, and the need for the hostel has passed.

Never before had I so appreciated the fellowship of my Church, and the prayerful support given me by some who knew what I was trying to do. To the Church I owe my faith and all it means, and I rejoice that I was able to give back some part of the treasure I have received.

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