

THE DOUBLE TURN.

“Warr and Batt” was the team name, and it was one to conjure with in the La Bassée sector of the British Front. It had only to figure on the programme of any Battalion entertainment for the success of that show to be assured. During a tedious spell in the trenches, when we were weary and fed-up almost to breaking point, we used to long mightily for the coming of that day when we should be relieved and would march back for a few days’ rest in Bethune, and to thousands in the ——th Division the main pleasure in prospect, and to be anticipated with delight, was that of laughing over the drolleries of Warr and Batt. There was many a man in the Division who could not have told you the name of his Brigadier or Divisional General, but I doubt if, from the youngest private of the latest draft to the General himself, you could have found one who did not know Privates Tommy Warr and Alec Batt by name and reputation. On occasion they had even eased for a little the burden of care and responsibility

that devolves on the Commander-in-Chief, had smoothed the corrugations of worry from his brow and creased the corners of his lips in forgetful laughter, had put him in a merry humour and earned his spoken compliments. They were the chief factors in the great cause of cheering us all up.

It was rarely indeed that Warr and Batt had a free evening when the Glasgows were resting in Bethune, for their services were in continuous request for every concert that was organised. Often they were very tired and weary in body and mind after a harassing tour of duty in the trenches, and would fain have rested during the few days of respite, but rather than disappoint "the boys" they put aside their own personal inclinations and generously and ungrudgingly gave of their best. In doing so they had nothing to gain save the gratitude and goodwill of their fellows; their sole reward—and many a highly paid professional might have envied it—was in the miles of smiles they made to blossom along the British Front, in the hurricanes of laughter they evoked.

For Warr and Batt were artists in their own way — which was the way of "ragging and gagging" and cheerful buffoonery. The turns at the average regimental concert in France may

be said to range from "rotten" to "quite decent;" but Warr and Batt presented a double turn that was really good.

I have only to close my eyes and I can see them now:—Alec Batt—tall and of good presence, sartorially splendid, the typical stage beau—gliding round the stage with easy, sinuous movements, his hands and shoulders gently swaying in time to the melody of the ragtime ditty that he sings; and the shoulders of the audience rock in unison: little Tommy Warr, shuffling behind him, imitating with a ludicrous seriousness all his partner's poses and gestures in a spirit of eccentric naïveté quite inimitable. The latter was responsible for most of the humour of the performance, and he was the author of the majority of the "gags" relating to life in the Army and in the trenches—jokes that went the round of the whole Division and are still recalled with gusto in many a dug-out and bivouac. His breathless, lightning style reminded one not a little of that of the late Dan Leno: the verve and abandon that characterised everything he did, the little flashes that betrayed a keen perception of character as well as of the humorous, the irrepressible whirlwind jollity, were the same. Much of his business, many of his "gags," were extempore—conceived and fired off

on the spur of the moment—and rendered his partner as helpless with laughter as the remainder of the audience. On such occasions Tommy Warr's childlike expression of amazement and wonder and surprise was a delight to see.

As time passed their "double turn" became more elaborate and better in every way: in their leisure they were constantly rehearsing new "business" and new songs, these last being forwarded to them as soon as issued by a firm of London publishers: and their "properties"—of music, make-up, and dress—assumed quite bulky proportions. Needless to say, these were not carried in their knapsacks when the battalion was on the march: a place was gladly found for them in the horse transport. For Warr and Batt had become a regimental institution.

Then the authorities at Headquarters decided that our jesters rendered a greater service to the Empire by cheering our fellows up when they were resting than by going into the trenches themselves. So Warr and Batt, along with other clever entertainers, were stationed for several months in Bethune, and every evening throughout a Winter they performed there—in a building that had formerly been a church—and brought light and laughter into the lives of thousands of fighting sweds.

Their fame even travelled to Blighty, and I know that a certain vaudeville syndicate offered them a good engagement at its music halls when they should be discharged from the Army. But this they refused: they had no desire to become professional entertainers: their only wish was to do their "bit" in the war—by means of laughter to help other fellows to do theirs—and in the end to return to their city desks and go quietly all the rest of their days. Their success and popularity left them quite unspoiled and were reckoned by them as things of no moment: they remained ever the same modest, unassuming, light-hearted fellows—the friends of all the world.

Now, there are only three things in life finer than the love of a man for a woman, and these are the love of a woman for a man, the love of a mother for her child, and the friendship—the love, if you like—existing between two men. And the last is not the least of the three.

Warr and Batt were good fellows—"steel-true and blade-straight"—and they were pals. Just that!—pals!—in all situations and in all circumstances—"through thick and thin—when luck was out, when luck was in!"

In the trenches and out—on the stage and off—they were inseparable. They were in the

same section of the same platoon—at work and at play they were together—they slept side by side—they shared everything they possessed: it was as natural for one to help the other in any way that offered as it was for him to joke about it. The high regard in which each held the other, the delight each found in the other's society, were apparent to all, but there was nothing mawkish in their relations—nothing of the spirit of a Mutual Admiration Society. They poked fun at each other constantly, and terms of abuse, delivered in a spirit of good-natured badinage, were more wont to pass between them than phrases superficially expressive of affection. Yet you knew that underneath all the gentle raillery Tommy Warr was thinking that Alec Batt was the finest chap in the world, and that Alec was thinking what a lovable and amusing little cuss his best pal was. For David and Jonathan were not more closely knit of soul than were these two.

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And in death they were not divided.

There came a morning—the 15th of July, 1916—when Warr and Batt, crouching shoulder to shoulder in a shallow ditch, heard the words—“Up, men!—over you go!” And as they scrambled up to the surface of the earth—“Good

luck, Tommy, lad!" said Alec Batt: "Good luck, old chap!" said Tommy Warr—then side by side they raced forward.

A hundred yards or so they advanced through a storm of bullets, then Tommy Warr suddenly crumpled and fell, and on the instant his pal was on his knees beside him. The little chap lay with wide unseeing eyes and moaned slightly as he breathed. Batt drew the limp form into the comparative shelter of a shell hole, and with frenzied haste loosened his equipment and clothing and fell to dressing his wound. And, having done that and not knowing what more to do, he chafed the nerveless hands and bathed the white brow with water from his bottle. He called to his pal by name—spoke to him in the soothing, sympathetic tones that one adopts to a sick child; but there was no response. Tommy's eyes had closed, his moans had ceased, and, but for his faint irregular breathing, he might have been dead.

On hands and knees two men crawled by, and, seeing Batt, advised him to return to the British lines: the attacking party had been almost wiped out—only a few remained—and it behoved every man now to try to save his own life. But Batt shook his head, and elected to remain beside his stricken friend in that shallow

pit under the brazen sky of morning, with streaming bullets and flying shell-splinters hissing their constant menace in his ear.

At last Tommy Warr's eyelids opened, and he lay awhile staring at his friend, but said no word.

"Cheeroh! Tommy lad," said Batt; "you'll soon be all right. I'm looking after you. . . . We'll wait a bit until things quieten and then I'll carry you back to our lines, and you'll be safe in Blighty before you realise it. . . . Does it hurt badly?"

The wounded man shook his head.

"Sure you're not in pain?"

Again he nodded assurance; then gradually a little playful smile trembled on his lips. Very faintly and haltingly—"Sorry, old chap," he whispered. "I'm—done for."

A pause, then the smile flickered again and he merely breathed—"This is the end . . . of our double turn: . . . not a bad end—is it—for me?" And yet a little later he gave the slightest perceptible pressure to the hand of his pal that lay in his. "So long, old chap!" said Tommy Warr—and never spoke again.

And these things I learned from the lips of Alec Batt himself, for he returned to the trenches in safety, bringing with him the dead body of

his friend, which he had placed on his outspread waterproof sheet and dragged by slow and painful inches over the bullet and shell-swept ground.

In the days that ensued Alec Batt wandered around like a lost soul on earth: his grief was plainly written on his face for all to see: his brooding eyes were eloquent of all his lips refused to say: he seemed a man for whom all the joy had gone out of life.

But it was not for long. Within a month an enemy shell had exacted the great toll from him too, and he had passed through the gates to join his waiting pal. And to-day their bodies lie within a few yards of each other near to the *Bois de Fourreaux* (High Wood).