

## "MISSION DES AMIS."

# FRIENDS' RELIEF WORK IN FRANCE.

## A VISIT TO THE WAR AREAS.

[The fund recently raised in these columns for the relief of the distressed war-areas having been handed over for administration to the Friends' Emergency and War Victims' Relief Committee, the "Manchester Guardian" has sent a special correspondent to observe and describe the work that is being carried on in various areas in which the Friends are administering relief. Below we print the first article on the subject.]

(From our Special Correspondent.)

PARIS, MONDAY.

The work in France of the Society of Friends dates back to the very early days of the war. It began in the autumn of 1914, when a party of British Quakers went out to soften the hardships of refugees, and has continued unbroken ever since. In 1917 the British were joined by American Quakers, and the two nationalities now work together under the respective direction of committees in London and Philadelphia.

It would be hard to find any form of service more beautiful and adventurous than this, which went on in the war and yet was not of it. The history of it includes many stories of work carried on under shell-fire, of the evacuation from bombarded villages of people too old and infirm to stand the hurried methods of the military authorities. Time after time the Mission des Amis was itself a refugee, and its efforts battered into pieces by enemy guns.

All that is happily over now, and the work of the Mission in its centres on the Marne, the Meuse, and the Somme can be devoted to the permanent welfare of France. It is estimated that in these districts the country is eighteen months nearer prosperity and happiness than are the devastated regions where the Friends are not helping. I have spent the last two days driving through destruction and chaos which no one can understand until he has seen it, and every hint of life or hope in all that misery was the direct outcome of the Mission's labour. Desolate, mournful fields, scarred with shell wounds and bound with tangles of rusty barbed wire; and away in the distance a cluster of huts built by the Friends and smoke curling up from the chimneys of homes more deeply appreciated surely than ever homes have been before. A village full of ghost houses, frail and haunted ruins, with one of them ingeniously turned into a little co-operative shop, and the familiar red star showing that a few Mission workers are living draughtily, precarious lives in the more solid part of another. The tragedy of this land of bitter memories and waste would be unbearable without them.

### The Maternity Home.

One of the oldest enterprises of the Mission des Amis—I give it the title by which this country knows it,—and the first one I visited, is at Châlons-sur-Marne. This sturdy little town, whose population seems largely to consist of German prisoners, has just restarted its tramway system, and only a few of its houses still retain that horrible look of nakedness in which shell-fire left them. It contains the maternity home of the Mission, and also a crèche for babies whose parents had either abandoned them or died. The maternity home was opened in 1914, and has had many adventures since then. At one time it had to be evacuated at a few hours' notice owing to a rapid German advance. When the villages round were being bombarded, the Mission took in hundreds of small children whose parents were driven out of their homes into the woods. The nurses at Châlons tell of one hectic day when forty babies arrived, absolutely unheralded, and at a time when the resources of the home were already overstrained. Each infant had been provided at the village *mairie* with a label bearing its name and address, but on the journey most of them had beguiled the tedium by chewing their distinguishing tags. By the time they were bathed—having spent much of their short lives in cellars, the ceremony was very essential,—and their clothes mixed up in the hurry, the anonymity of those forty babies was complete.

In these days the work at Châlons is more tranquil. The maternity home takes in refugee mothers who have some sort of a makeshift home for themselves, which is not the sort of place in which one would care to receive a new little life. On the day before I visited it the ten hundred and nineteenth baby (1,019) born under the care of the Mission had arrived. The first child to be born there is now five years old. In the crèche down the road live a number of small, destitute children who are not old enough or strong enough to be farmed out in families according to the French fashion. One bonny little girl, aged two or three, named Denise, is the only surviving member of a whole household killed in the bombardment. Then there is Marguerite, who weighed only 2½ pounds when she was born, and is nine months old now and has quite lived down her unsatisfactory beginning. There are dozens of them, each one an innocent victim to the horrors of war and dependent for almost all the good that the future will bring them on the efforts of the Mission. Just now the Society of Friends is arranging to endow the hospital and crèche at Châlons and pass them on to the control of the French.

### In a Mission Hospital.

The work of the Mission des Amis in France centres round a number of small headquarters or *équipes*. The largest in the Meuse region is at Grange, a hamlet near Clermont-en-Argonne. Clermont itself is just a cluster of ruins, beautifully set on the edge of the Argonne Forest. The most interesting building in it is a hospital run by the Mission. All through the war it was in charge of a fine old nun, Sœur Gabrielle, who nursed wounded Germans in it during the enemy occupation of the town and whose conversations with her captors were given point by the fact that they almost invariably held a revolver to her ear by way of emphasis. She is working there now with the Mission nurses, whose patients the day I was there were mostly old ladies and absolutely destitute. One of them, aged more than eighty, said "Vive l'Angleterre" when I was introduced to her, and another, who has lost even her sight, kissed my hand over and over again. Half of the hospital is still in ruins. The rest has been repaired by the British and American workers, and the walls distempered by German prisoners. This employment of German prisoners by the Friends in almost every field of work has raised an interesting question with regard to their wages. The French Government pays them a small sum, which can only be spent at the camp canteens, and it will not allow any more to be given to them. There is strong feeling in the Mission against this policy, and so in the next few days two workers are setting out for Germany and will pay to the families the money which the men have earned. Very good recruits are given of the industry of these prisoners and of the genuine enthusiasm they put into their work. A social evening was given at the Montfaucon *équipe* last week, in which a French officer and German prisoners sat round a table in perfect amity. M. A. L.