



*Sketch by*

ACROSS THE ALBANIAN ALPS.

*William Smith.*

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SCENIC PICTURES FROM THE WAR ZONES.

*I.—IN THE TRENCH LINES.*

BY MAJOR J. B. GILLIES.

[*Passed by the Press Bureau.*]

They say this kwintra's bonny, an' it's trowth I've seen a waur,  
But fat's her vine-clad slopes to me, 'at stretch oot near an' far,  
Aside my ain aul' Morven, an' my kingly Lochnagar  
Takin' aff his kep i' the mornin'?

Rev. GEORGE ABEL.  
(“Wylins Fae My Wallet”).

THE Acting Editor has invited me (among others, I believe) to furnish readers of the *Journal* with some particulars of the scenic features of the war zone where the military operations in which I am participating are being conducted, particularly as contrasted with the scenery with which members of the Club are more or less familiar. Well, the War Zone in France, so far as my acquaintance with it goes, has no “features”—at any rate no scenic ones. We are not in the famous spot my colleague imagined [“The Labyrinth”], but if it is any more of a labyrinth of trenches than our present position, then all I can say is—Heaven forbid

that I should ever be asked to take a company through it in the dark! This place is scarred with *boyaux* (trenches), and honey-combed with *abris* (dug-outs).

But it is "features" that are editorially demanded. Take one of our trips to the trenches. We had been in rest billets in a small and dirty village (about half the size of Braemar) for six days' "rest." "Rest," by the way, does not mean resting. During these six days, about 40 men were daily putting in a good day's work clearing the local middens and trying to make the place sanitary; other 200 or so were leaving about 7.30 a.m. daily, marching two to three miles, and then doing six to eight hours' work on communication trenches. At the end of our six days' rest we were due to relieve another battalion in the trenches.

You leave your rest billets in the late afternoon. The village has a dirty, "worse-for-wear" appearance. It has hardly been shelled, as it is a very unobtrusive little place, but it has been used by troops of one sort or another for months—and it looks it. You go down to a fair-sized stream, now a bathing-place for Tommies. Across the stream you turn along a road with the inevitable rows of trees, passing a small wood, nearly all the trees of which are ruined by being barked by the horses. On your right is an old man ploughing with a horse that looks about as old as himself. On your left you find a tree being pulled down: a shell had cut a neat bite out of the trunk and left it in a "rocky" condition. You proceed along the road till you reach a main road which takes you to the end of the communication trenches. This main road passes through several villages. They are all more or less damaged, and the farther you go the worse they are. Each is full of men and horses: the men in dug-outs under the houses; the horses anywhere out of sight from above—and everywhere, on men, horses, carts, walls and doors, is mud, mud, mud!

At last you come on the village where the communication trenches begin. The village green is a

cemetery, where the French had buried their dead. There are rows of wooden crosses, many of them with metal wreaths in purple and green and white hung on them. You pass the village church, which has been more or less knocked about like every other building in this village. One shell had struck the steeple without bringing it down, and had left a gap about the size of itself in the side. You turn up and slip into the end of the communication trench.

It is getting dusk—all reliefs are done by night—and you “plug up” this trench for about a mile in single file; and, after about a mile of this—and I think it will be admitted to be featureless—you see looming through the dark two rows of what were once trees along a road, but are now rows of splintered lopped-off stumps; and the trench bends to the left along this road. A little farther on you find bricks, stones and mortar in the side of the trench, and you know you are passing through the village of, or, rather, what was the village of ———. It had once been a pretty little place with a small wooded park. The daffodils are still growing thickly in the park, but the trees are hardly recognisable. There was once a church here, you are told. Well, there may have been; but no one looking at the place now for the first time could say where that church had been. And the Hun is not yet content. He still fires five or six shells daily, usually all together, about 11 or 11.15. The Hun is nothing if not methodical.

It is now quite dark and you proceed down the trench—sometimes in pitch darkness, and at other times you get in a small sprint when a light goes up, till eventually you reach the front of the trench and hear the bullets plopping on the other side of your parapet, and the ricochets whirring off into the dark. You relieve the company holding your bit of trench, and the men stumble off down the long road you have come up, and are lucky if they reach their rest billets by 2 a.m.

Well, I fear I have said very little about “scenic features.” The country is very flat and rolling. Looking

out from some healthy spot over the trench lines, which are generally on slightly rising ground, it seems as if a gigantic rake had been drawn across the ground, turning up lines of dirty white chalk and leaving little spaces of green between ; and this extends as far as one can see. Here and there a hay-stack or a clump of trees is visible, and the ruins of one or two villages show up amongst the line of trenches. But, after all, it is no scenery, and one feels an awful worm living between walls of earth ; and the value of a week-end at Maggie Gruer's goes up and up and up, and you decide to run up there for one day sure next leave—and then the leave comes and there is no time for it ! However, a day will come when one will return to the hills, and return with an increased appreciation of their splendour and of one's luck in getting to them.

Now, if you will allow me to stretch "scenic features" somewhat, I think the prettiest sight out here is an aeroplane being shelled on a sunny day. That sounds rather callous perhaps, but then they are so seldom brought down. If, in addition to the shelling, an enemy plane comes out, and the two planes in air have a little scrap with their machine guns, you feel you have had a good morning. You see the aeroplane sailing through the blue sky, its white wings and propeller flashing in the sun, with a trail of smoke from the exhaust following behind. It inclines out over your front line, and then you suddenly see a light fluffy ball of smoke appear beside it, and then six or eight more in rapid succession, and after a little you hear the bang-bang-bang ! very faint and far away ; and usually the airman sheers slowly and contemptuously off.

I am afraid there is little "scenic" about this. If "zoological features" had been asked, I could have enlarged *ad infinitum*. Of course, it's rats I refer to—not what many readers may suppose ; though had I been an American and been solicited for a description of these other "features," I should doubtless have responded—"Search *me*, stranger !"