

In the far off country,  
December 11th, 1915.

My dear friends,-

For some considerable time past I have been trying to get a letter started, but up to the present time have been unable, however we managed to get hold of a typewriter the other day and I will endeavour to tell you how things have been going in this quarter these last few weeks. In these parts we are warned very severely against putting the name of the district or town at the top of the letter, and the rules of censoring are very strict, so you see I am not able to tell you that we are somewhere in the vicinity of Salonica. We were told before we left Egypt that the town of Salonica was beautiful, that the promenade and beach were the places in Greece, and consequently all our hopes were centered in this town. We left Alexandria in blissful ignorance of our destination although many of the staff whispered "Absolutely confidential" that we were bound for Greece. The sail through the Mediterranean and Aegean seas was beautiful. The water in these parts is a most beautiful deep blue which is not seen in our own seas, and the many islands encountered in the Aegean standing out of the deep blue water combine in making a delightful picture. You will doubtless have heard all about the torpedoing of our troopship, and the chilling reception which these blue waters gave to us, so I will not make any reference to the accident. It was most unfortunate and the loss of life & property was severe.

Our first view of the town showed us that we had indeed come to a thoroughly Eastern part, and after the eternal sand of Egypt the green of the surrounding hills was most welcome. Perhaps the things which struck me first were the multitudes of spires rising all over the city, and the great expanse of red roofs. There is not such a thing as galvanised iron in Salonica, and the spires rising like so many needles amongst the red gave a pretty appearance to the town. Naturally we were all anxious to get ashore and see around, but as there was not a complete uniform on the ship this was quite out of the question. For three days we remained in the Harbour living on bully and biscuit, and sleeping on the iron decks of a cattle boat. It was hardly as nice as it might have been but we were all much too thankful for our deliverance out of Deavy Jones' Locker to grumble about the temporary quarters which had been allotted to us. At the end of the three days we were taken ashore and joined the remainder of our party who had come from a Hospital Ship, and from down the coast. No. 1 N.S. Zealand Stationary had always flattered itself on being quite a well dressed spick and span concern, but the crowd which was lined up on the wharf that evening was about as motley a mob as it would be possible to see anywhere. Everyone wanted a shave, and the clothes were unique. We had been issued with some Greek civilian clothes, & a certain quantity of Army Equipment. Trousers had been issued but unfortunately these were of the Greek pattern and make. I say unfortunately because the seams were very poorly made, and nearly every pair had burst some in one place and some in another, - the effect from an artistic point of view was unique, but we were a rum looking lot of soldiers. We all had a couple of blankets rolled up and strung around our shoulders, and this is how the Hospital came ashore. Had it not been so cold, muddy, and miserable, we might have appreciated the humour of it all, but I think that we were all too much occupied in wondering where our bed was to be & where the next meal was to come from to laugh at our own unfortunate appearance. After a wait on the wharf we started off for our destination. The darkness had fallen, and instead of the "Fashionable watering place" we had expected to find, we found that the streets were narrow, and almost knee deep in mud and slush with great holes here and there (these are used by the natives to hide in when the big army motor lorries come rolling by). Through several of these streets we scrambled along, eventually pulling up at an old cotton mill where our temporary quarters were to be. It was just about as dirty a show as could be imagined, and just outside there was a big well about 50 feet square (apparently where the cotton had been washed in by gone days) which was full of green slimy water, - the smell was, ah, well, it was --- bad. With the

inside, the small outside, and mad everywhere, you can easily imagine that we were not exactly enamoured of our surroundings, however, we were all pretty tired and soon tried to get to sleep. In the next room to the one in which I was sleeping the town picquet was resting and about 3am when the guard changed we were all violently awakened by hearing the following "Are ye there O'Leary, are ye there O'Leary, O'Leary" - eventually a sleepy "Yes" came out, then the language became lurid "If ye're there then why the -----devil dont ye answer yer name". This settled sleep, and we lay about waiting for the dawn. That morning we had some more bully, and some more biscuit, & after partaking of these we had a look about the part of the town we were in. The street we were on was called "Octopus" ~~street~~, and led into the main street of the town. Although it was early in the morning, this street was just a seething mass of mules ambulances, motor lorries, Greek soldiers, Tommies, Froggies, and so on. The Greek soldiers were there by the thousand, and we were much interested to notice the crude manner in which their transport was carried out. Pack mules were the chief medium used, and there were also a number of small carts, bullock waggons and so on. We smiled then, but since then - when the snow came - the Greeks have had the laugh with them. There was a great military activity about the town, soldiers in great numbers passing and repassing, while motor lorries, motor cars, and so on buzzed about.

We were quartered down in the town for about three days and were then shifted out into the country. A few tents had been borrowed, and temporary quarters were erected on the slope of a hill lying some distance back from the town. Everyone was pleased with the place, for the country looked very much like our own New Zealand. The first event of interest was the finding of a tortoise, and he was quite a curiosity until it was found that there were numbers of them all around. Several small snakes were brought in by zealous hunters, also some moles were dug out. Evidences of wild flowers could be seen on all sides, but there was not much left except some larkspurs, and some late autumn crocuses. We remained in temporary quarters for about a fortnight when we took over a Hospital from a Casualty Clearing Station which was moving up country, and since that time we have been going "eyes out" all the time. At the present time we have put through about as many patients as we had all the time we were at Fort Said, and have been acting as Field Ambulance, Clearing Station, and Field Hospital all in one. It is a ~~great~~ satisfaction to know that we are being of some real benefit here. There is not one man on the whole staff but has more than enough to do, and although we have hundreds over our war establishment number in patients there is no grumbling. We had expected to have gone up to the Fighting Area some weeks ago, but such remarkable things have been transpiring since that time that I do not think we will move on at all, at least not for some time.

It was some change to come from beautiful sunny Egypt to the cold and damp of Salonica. We were fortunate, however, in getting a fortnight of mild weather immediately on our arrival here, and this sort of broke us in to the local climate. Since then the winter has started properly, and we can expect it for some time to come. About a fortnight ago it started to snow, and continued off and on for about a couple of days. It made a remarkably beautiful picture to see all the surrounding country garbed in silvery white, with thousands of tents dotted here and there over the hills and plains. At the end of the second day, however, it started to freeze, and for some time it was just about the dizzy limit. It is cold enough sleeping in a tent in the winter time, but when there is a couple of inches of snow, and a temperature somewhere very far down, it is jolly hard to get down on to the oil sheet, however, there is a consolation in everything, and we consoled ourselves, cold though we were, ~~xx~~ in thinking how intensely cold it was further up. In a couple of days the snow cleared away and gave place to about as fine a brand of slush as could be wished for. There was mud, mud, mud, in all directions, and the conditions were not exactly the best. We waded out in this for about a week and then it cleared away somewhat, however, these last five days have been intensely foggy so as a consequence the mud has returned once more. The fog has a very depressing effect, and we are all looking forward to the arrival of Sol once again.

Historically Salonica is a most interesting place, and traces of very ancient times can be seen on every hand. There are traces of the very old empire of Macedonia, the Grecian, and the Roman periods, while of course evidences of more recent Turkish times can be seen everywhere. We are somewhat at a loss to find out the history of the place. It is out of the beaten track, and no guide book can be found, however, there are places, such as Alexander's Triumphant Arch which need no Guide Book to explain, as their age is obvious. The arch referred to is on the Eastern side of the town, and in spite of its great age is still in very good preservation. It is strange to see this old relic of the dead past looking down on the modern electric tram underneath. The ancient carving of chariots, and figures like those seen in Egypt are still stand out in bold relief on the second section of the archway, and are a great source of interest. I have been unable to ascertain the exact time that the arch was built, more than that it was at the time of Alexander the Great. Salonica and Philippi were the chief towns of the old time Macedonia of which St. Paul wrote, and were it for no other reason than this, the town I am writing of would be of very great interest. It lies on the face of a hill sloping down towards the sea, and is surrounded by a very ancient city wall which is in rather good order in places, but in others it has crumbled away altogether. On the Northern side there is an inner wall and from the strength of this and the outer wall, it would appear that this was the spot which was most open to attack. The old wall is turreted, and in places rises to a height of 50 or 60 feet high and is many feet thick. To the modern seige gun it would be no obstacle, but when looking over it I could not help feeling what an insurmountable barrier it must have been to the invaders of bygone days. On the Eastern side there is a rather pretty suburb, and in this place there are some fairly modern dwellings, but within the city wall, the ancient stone houses covered with tiles are all that can be seen. The view from the top of the hill on the Northern side is worth going many miles to see. Spires rise up on every hand, in many of the courtyards of the houses are old trees, and the green of these, the red of the roofs, and the spires here and there make a sight absolutely new to New Zealand eyes. Away in the distance, grand and lofty stands the mighty Olympus of whom the ancients wrote, while nearer, the undulating country, and harbour filled with shipping complete a most impressive picture. I had the pleasure of seeing it all one night just as the sun was setting and it was delightful.

Closer acquaintance with the city however completely drives the artistic and the beautiful out of mind. The streets are narrow, squalid, and filthy, while that everlasting smell, common to these densely populated towns of the Orient, is much in evidence. Coming down from the hill one finds that the houses are low, and dirty, that the streets are just as they were a thousand years ago, the natural rock of the hillside all rough and uneven serving for road and pavement, and that the people are on a par with their surroundings. Even in the centre of the town, the main street is only about half the width of any of the streets in our big towns, and along these streets crowd about as out-throat looking a ~~crowd~~ <sup>mob</sup> as is possible to see. There are Turks, and Bulgars, and Germans galore, some of the former being arrayed in most remarkable costumes. The coat of many colours worn by Joseph in the early days was never in it with some of the patch work arrangements worn by these people. The common dress amongst the poorer classes is a loose sort of a pantaloon, the seat of which comes down to the knees, and on this garment in most cases dozens of patches can be counted. This dress is not confined to the men either, for women sport the same chic garb when walking the streets of the city. Then another rig-out is that which is common to the Spanish Jews who abound here. Their women folk wear a sort of green cap shaped like an up turned saucer and down the back is something like the jelly bag that the N.S. Girls used to wear. This arrangement, all adorned with beads, comes down their back about a foot, and into it they appear to stow their loose hair - truly a novel way of getting rid of it. Their dress consists of a corset kind of a body, and an immense skirt after the style of the crinolines of the 1850s fifties. Were it not that so many of them wear these garments it would be amusing, but after a laugh or two at the start, I have not taken much interest in them.

Some of the Grecian girls are really lovely, great large expressive eyes, and beautiful long hair. Some of them dress like our American girls, and others in the manner common amongst their own class. Members of the ladies from the Turkish Harem can be seen, their faces completely hidden by the veils which they wear. The lower class men are little better than beasts of burden, and they appear to eke out a living in carrying loads on their backs, following the boot-black business, and begging. To a colonial it is strange to see the enormous number of boot blacks both here and in Egypt. There are hundreds of these, as well as shops where you step in to have your boots cleaned. The charge made is 10 leptas, or 1 penny a time, and a very fine job is made too.

Apart from brass workers, and copper smiths there appear to be no industries here at all, and it is marvellous how so many people manage to make a living. There are hundreds of shops where the most obvious German trash is sold at exorbitant prices, and indeed it is impossible to buy anything of really good quality at all. There are scores of money changers who appear to do a most lucrative business. The coinage here is rather easier than Egyptian to manage. The lowest coin is the lepta, 10 of which make a penny, and 10 of these make a drachma, 25 drachmas equalling one pound sterling. There are five, 10, and 25 drachma notes, but gold is never seen at all. The rate of exchange on English money varies from day to day, but it usually stands about .80 drachmas in the £ (about 8d) so you can see that it costs something to get money sent across here. The duty charged on all goods imported is apparently very high, and prices here are about 100% higher than in Egypt. Native labour in Egypt can be obtained at about 1/3 per day, but here the rate is about 3/6 to 4/ per day.

The only building worth mentioning is a great old tower which was built about the time of the Roman occupation. It is about 100 feet high, and is turreted round the top. The loopholes are all very high in the walls, the lowest being about 30 feet from the ground. The tower is still used by the Greek Army for observation and other purposes. - We tried to get in one day, but were rather rudely ejected by the authorities. In the suburb on the Eastern side the streets are rather well laid out in trees, etc., but within the town proper there is nothing in this line. The streets and roads are all cobbled with rough stones, making walking very tiring indeed, and when there is a bit of frost about it is difficult to keep one's feet.

The most outstanding feature about the whole place is the number of graveyards there are. Scores of acres in and around Salonica are occupied in this manner, and it is interesting to see the ones of very ancient times. Rough slabs of rock are used as tombstones, and on most of these there is not even a trace of an inscription. In the newer cemeteries marble slabs have been used and are placed so close together as to look like an immense crop of mushrooms when viewed from a little distance. It is evident that the older cemeteries are Turkish as during the past few days, the Greek soldiers have been pulling out the stones and breaking them up for road metal, while the chaos everywhere indicates that there is no respect shown to the people of ancient times who are buried there. The place has changed hands so often that the family interest in burial grounds is limited only to the families who have remained. On the Eastern side is a Jewish cemetery of more modern times, the tombs in which are built up and have a flat slab of marble on the top. On this slab is engraved the usual inscription but at the top of the slab such things as lighted candles, locks & keys, Tables of the Law, etc are carved.

On the road out to this Camp there are hundreds and hundreds of low brick buildings which were built at the time of the last war for the refugees, and today these are still fully occupied by a many of the poorest people. There is no furniture to be seen, and the inhabitants are for the most part clad in rags. They appear to have no occupation other than begging and thieving, and at the camp here we have difficulty in keeping them out. Women as well as men come around begging for scraps of bread and clothes, and until a week or two ago when the regulation forbidding them to enter was strictly enforced, we had any amount of them about every day.

I am writing this page on the 14th of December, and we are just in the midst of momentous times. Here the battle front is I cannot say, but it is very evident that we will be in the thick of something very soon. This morning we have witnessed a sight worth coming across the ocean to see when the Scotchmen, the Kilties and the ~~men~~ moved out to meet the enemy. In addition to their arms all the boys all carried their entrenching tools, and the never ceasing stream moving down on to the Serbian road was a sight unparalleled in anything I have ~~seen~~ <sup>witnessed</sup>. There was a ~~33rd~~ reality about it all which made it quite different to anything in the march line that I have seen. Several English Battalions came first, and then the Scotchmen, headed by their pipe band, the music from which made the hills ring. To see these grand fellows fills one with enthusiasm, and during the march out this morning, nearly every eye in the camp followed them as they stepped out to do battle for their country.

You have doubtless heard about the retreat which has taken place up country, and how our people have evacuated Dorian. ~~It~~ This place was the advanced base, and it was on the shores of Lake Dorian that we would probably have been sent had our boat not been torpedoed coming over. It is about 40 miles from here, and from all reports it appears that the district up there has been occupied by the enemy. They say that we are all going to be driven into the sea(?????????) - I've got my doubts on this point, for ~~the~~ the men who went through Loos and Le Basse are not very liable to be "Driven". A number of Serbian soldiers are in town at present re-equipping and having a spell after the arduous times they have experienced further up. I think that the difficulty up country here lies in the communications. It is only 40 miles to Dorian, yet it is about an eight hours train journey, and our front previously was about two days march past that. The latter portion of the march was over country impassable to anything other than pack mules, so you can realise that our people have had very considerable difficulty in getting supplies up to the fighting area. The obstacles which have been in our way up to the present time will of course ~~be~~ be encountered by the enemy, and there is some talk of their remaining at Dorian until such time as they have things better. (As says the local pro-German press). The Greeks seem to have made a proper use of things, that is unless they intend to come in against us - if the latter, well, let 'em all come, the Scotties are here.

When we left Egypt we brought over a few Egyptians with us but with the exception of two they perished in the wreck. Since coming here they have have been a source of great amusement to all the camp, and in their hatred of the ~~...~~ as their feelings ran quite away with them. One day they took an afternoon off and scalded away into town, but when they were coming back they were arrested, and as they can only speak a few words in English they were popped into the "Clink", where they spent the night. In the morning they were marched up here under an armed guard, and almost cried with joy when they were handed over, "Finish Salonica, finish, finish" was about all they could say. It had been a bitter cold night and they had spent the night with 20 others in a bell tent without blankets - this killed the wanderling desire for some days. The next time they went in was also unfortunate, for at one part of the journey they were accosted by a Greek who wanted to buy their clothes - a favourite trick with the Greeks. These two Gippies, "Mr Black Hassan", and "Abbas" are intensely loyal, and "Mr. Hassan" strongly resented the Greek wanting to take his clothes, & commenced a row, the upshot of which was that the Greek drew his bayonet. Hassan continued the fight, and ultimately got the bayonet from the Greek and gave him a prod to go on with. Then the Military Police arrived, and back they were marched to camp again under an armed guard. Hassan swore vengeance on the next Greek he found and a few mornings ago the opportunity came. Taking advantage of the dense fog which was hanging around, some thieving Greeks (there are thousands of them here) came up the gully behind our camp, and seeing some washing hanging out beside one of the tents, which by the way happened to be Hassan's, they stole along and appropriated some of it. Like a tiger out bounded Mr. Black Hassan and Abbas, and after a chase succeeded in running their quarry to earth. Then their pent up feelings were let loose, and those two Greeks got it in pure Arabic

in which there are ~~no~~ bargains, but just a good old rough and tumble. Then they marched them up the camp, and when told that they had to take them down to the Provost Marshal they were delighted. The trouble ~~is~~ is that the incident has just whetted their appetite, and I pity any thieving Greek who comes around now.

Well I fear that this is an awful jumble of a letter. It has been written at odd times, just when I have had a few minutes clear. I trust that you are all well & happy, and that it will not be long until this wretched old war is finished up.

With best love, and (although very late) wishes for a bright & happy New Year.

Yours Sincerely,

*Alexander*