

**STANDING BY: WAR-  
TIME REFLECTIONS IN  
FRANCE AND FLANDERS**

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Standing by: war-time reflections in France and Flanders by Robert Keable

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**ROBERT KEABLE**

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**STANDING BY**

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## STANDING BY: WAR-TIME REFLECTIONS IN FRANCE AND FLANDERS

### I

#### ON "STANDING BY"

**T**HE Army cannot have taken much less than five million of us to whom soldiering has been practically a new experience. Some, of course, had served in O.T.C.'s or Territorials or Volunteers, and for a year or two put in a fortnight annually under canvas. But we had not known the Army. We had never got past the thrill of the uniform, and that curious sense, either of responsibility in taking, or of membership in giving, the salute. A good many of us had enjoyed the game immensely. We had even hoped to play it under more strenuous conditions. We had been aware that it developed us. But we had no idea what it would be like when the routine had become part of our existence, when the machine had dominated our personalities, and

when the days had lengthened to months and the months to years.

Moreover, of course, this is to set aside the fact that no one, even in the regular Army itself, knew what this war would be like. It is one thing to belong to a regular army whether in peace or in war, and quite another to be a unit in a nation mobilised from top to bottom all but irrespective even of sex. Besides, no living Englishman had experienced a Western European War unless as an isolated volunteer in 1870, and a soldier's life in a foreign civilised country was as strange as combat with highly trained conscript armies in the field itself. All this is upon the surface, but it might be supposed that the ground of such an experience had been fairly well covered by now. Our authors have revealed to us the making of "Kitchener's Army"—it sounds quite far away now; every phase of life in the trenches, on the sea, and in the air; even the experiences of V.A.D.'s and chaplains, the latter everywhere. I might well have asked myself where I came in. In fact, however, this book has been written without the posing of such a question at all.

Life is so varied that every man, since each of us has a different pair of spectacles on his nose, sees it differently from his neighbour; he sees more and he sees less, he sees this more sharply or that less clearly. The record of every point of view has its value, I think, even if it be so unassuming

and commonplace a record as that given here. Not that this particular life, in this age and on this Front, could be commonplace altogether, but it is true that there are fewer thrilling chapters in my little record than in most. My lesson, if any, has been to learn ; my task, if I have one, to seek to indicate the value of one of the simplest experiences in the Army ; but the early simple lessons are often the most valuable.

That the Army is a great school everybody knows, but that its first and last lesson is patience is not quite so apparent. Discipline, brotherhood, fortitude, resource, all these it plainly teaches, but I should put first patience. For every one of us spends a great part of his time in "standing by," and most of us find this the hardest thing of all. Possibly a parson finds it as hard as anyone, and certainly he has most of it to do. He finds it hard, because a parson worth his salt never stands by in his parish. His duty is never done. His responsibility can never be shared or passed on to another. In a native mission this is emphasised a hundred-fold, for the mission priest is made responsible, whether he will or no, not merely for marriages but for matches, not merely for Sundays but for sundries. In my parish I am a bit of farmer, doctor, lawgiver, schoolmaster and choir trainer, architect and all but magistrate, as well as priest. Even when other people undertake these duties, I cannot stand by and watch them do it.