

France.

May 7th, 1917.

Dear Mr. & Mrs. Willis,

No doubt you will be expecting a letter from me about dear old Eric. You will have heard from the Authorities about his "passing out", and it will have been published in the papers, but I know how anxiously you will be waiting for fuller news. So I will do my best to tell you about him but if I do not tell things as clearly as I should, you will know that I feel his loss more keenly than can be imagined by anyone who has not had a true, faithful cobbler. It happened four days ago, and it is only now that I can keep my thoughts sufficiently in control to be able to tell you all about it. When I hurt my knee (which is still troublesome) I thought to leave the stretcher bearers and join the nursing staff doing hospital work and tried to persuade Eric to go with me, but he would not hear of it so, when this "stunt" (as we call a battle) came off, instead of remaining behind I went with him back among the bearers, as I could not bear the thought of allowing him to go without me and now I am oh, so glad I did for I was with him right to the end.

It was the first day of the attack and we began work at about 4 a.m. We were behind a railway embankment in which were dug out two dressing stations (Regim. Aid Posts) and as soon as the wounded began to come back Eric and I commenced to dress their wounds until we had 4 cases and then we carried one of them with the assistance of two other S.B.s shoulder high across open country where shells were flying in scores. We returned safely and carried another and another until we were tired and then we went up to our "possie" or little shallow excavation in the side of the embankment near the top to get a little bite to eat and have a drink. In a few minutes we returned and began again until we were - at least I was - fairly fagged. I suggested that we had a rest between each carry as there were others who had not done very much, but Eric would not hear of it, but went straight at it again. He seemed to have no fear whatever, and as one of our lads said of him "Was a game as a bull ant". I forgot to say that this Railway Embankment was the front line where the infantry "hopped" over, and where there were many machine guns posted along the top, so Fritz shelled us continually, and when we were not "carrying" we crouched against the sloping side of the bank. You could not hear yourself speak, the din was so great. After a while Eric went into the dressing station for a shell dressing and just then a squad of four was wanted immediately for a "carry" and I and three others went so we were separated for a carry or two, for when I returned he was out, and was away so long that I became very anxious. At last, as I went out I met him coming back quite happy and unconcerned. It appears that when he reached the end of our carry there was no relay squad to take the man, so the four of them had to carry him on to the next - a long journey - and added to that he found a man lying near a stretcher in danger of the shells and he and the others (Eric asked them to do it) carried the man to the next post - a brave deed considering the dangers. I just had time to warn him of machine gun bullets which had given us some anxious moments a little further back and went on as it is not wise to stop for a spell. When I returned he was at the embankment as there had been a lessening of the number of cases, because the wounded could



be brought in on account of the terrible firing. We lay against the embankment and suddenly volunteers were called for to carry a man who, with two others, was lying on the other side of the line in "no man's land". Eric was the first to jump up and off we went at top speed for things were more lively than ever. We found our man and brought him in without any of us getting a scratch - even now I can hardly believe it. Then Eric suggested that we went up to our "possie" and had a drink as the day was very sunny. We went up and found our little hole filled with two or three infantry. We had a drink and were returning down the bank and had just reached the bottom when a shell just cleared the top and fell behind us. I was knocked down on my face unhurt and at once jumped up to see how Eric was. I saw the poor old kid trying to rise and as I reached him, he said, "Oh! Oh! God help me! God help me! Oh Harry!" I ran for a stretcher lying near and put him on it and two of us carried him to the dressing station, tho' there was no hope, but I did not know it then. I asked the M.O. to do his best and told him that he was one of our bearers who had done good work. We cut away his clothes and found that a small piece of shell had penetrated his body at the back. We dressed the wound and got him ready to take on to the next post, but he began to sink, and the Dr. said he had better be left near medical aid. I am glad to say that after the first few minutes he did not suffer hardly at all - the nerves had been so shocked as to be numbed and the M.O. - a kind man - injected Morphia as well, so that he was quite easy, except that now and then he asked to be moved a little. His mind was quite clear right to the end and he talked to us quite rationally. He would say "Harry, move me on to my right side - that's right." Then "Harry, turn me on my back and crook up my legs." I did everything he asked me to and after a while I think he began to realize how things were for he said, "Harry, you won't tell them at home, will you," meaning I suppose that I was not to tell you how badly he was hit. I answered, "Of course I won't, old man. You can tell them yourself when you get better", and he said "That's right." The Dr. asked me his name and number and I was too upset to remember the last figure. I said "1484" - and Eric said "5" quite calmly - and this was about five minutes before he died - about 12.30 midday. He was hit at about 11.45 a.m. I had taken his hand in mine and he said "Is that you, Harry", and I said "Yes, old man", and he said "Give my love to all at home." Then he spoke very low and I could catch the words "Dad" "Mum" and I think "May" and then I heard him say "God - good" "Glad" and some other word that sounded like a name. There was so much noise that I could not hear when he spoke so low, but afterwards I think he said "Love" and "God" again. He looked quite happy and well and gradually his breathing stopped. Another bearer and I carried him out, but before doing so I took from his tunic his pay book (which I have handed in), a black wallet with photos of you and his sister, a metal mirror in case, a Testament, a photo of himself, and a fountain pen. I have already sent by a safe route the wallet, pen and Testament, a little boomerang I took from his neck and a £1. I found in his wallet. I have kept the photo and would very much like to have it for myself if you could spare it, but if not I can send it to you. I did not get his purse; it must be in his trousers, which in the stress and excitement I forgot to search, but I don't think there would be much in it as he has had practically no pay since coming to France, having had money with him which I think was nearly all spent. Of course there are other things which he left back here



I'll send them at the first safe opportunity. His diary has been all kept up to about March. I will be very careful as to how I send it - I may bring it home myself. His other things (underwear) I have distributed among his mates. They were badly off for socks and I know that you would like them to have them. I think I have kept what you would like to have back. I hope I have done the best, but it is very hard to do things properly here. I can't carry anything extra about with me as we have to carry all our gear on our backs. And when I laid him out on the stretcher, the shells were flying, wounded men were calling out and everything was so nerve-racking that I could hardly keep my balance. After I saw him safely placed in the most sheltered spot I think I must have collapsed for I woke up in a deep trench running along the edge of the bank and some men were giving me drink. I suppose it was weakness for I had had nothing since the one piece of bread in the morning. I must have fallen into the trench. I started off for my "possie" and met our sergeant, a fine fellow, who had heard about Eric being hit. When I told him the truth he was cut up and said, "One of my best men". He told me not to do any more bearing and so I lay down and went off into a kind of stupor. I woke up at 5 p.m. - my first thought was about burying my cobbler. I went down to try and do so but was ordered to stop as the bombardment was increasing. I hoped that it would perhaps cease but it did not - in the meantime I went on with the stretcher bearing as 30 of our men had either been killed or wounded. Towards dark about 9 p.m. suddenly there was a cry that the Germans were attacking and, at once, we A.M.C. men were ordered to take up what cases there were and go back with them and not return as the relief had just come. So I went back out of it all and about midnight reached our headquarters. I went to bed but could not sleep thinking of my dear mate lying away out there by himself. First thing in the morning I went to the Colonel and asked leave to go back and bury him but he refused it and instead ordered me at once to bed and gave me some Pot. Brom. I think. I slept a long time and when I woke the Colonel was looking into the tent. He told me that a man had been sent up to bring back Eric and he would be buried close by. But tho' I said I was quite well he would not let me go. I waited all the afternoon for the return and was disappointed at first to learn that he had been buried just near where he fell. Afterwards I have liked the idea better for I think it more fitting that he should lie near the scene of his plucky actions. Today I went back to see his grave and am going to have a head cross erected - in fact my brother - an engineer - will make it if he can get the time before we move away from the front. If my brother cannot make the cross I will ask the padre who buried him to have a cross erected. I have met this padre and he has a letter or two which I purposely left on Eric to give his address in case I could not bury him.

When I return I will tell you more about it. I miss my pal very much and extend my sincerest sympathy to you his parents and to his sisters. I wish I could be with you to help make the blow lighter and so that we could console each other. It makes me sad to go into places on my own where we two had gone together and to have my meals by myself. We always shared everything and made much fun out of our tucker. To show how jests come true. Once in February Eric had been using something of mine and I asked him when he returned it to put it in my kit bag, which he did, and then in a



spirit of mischief he said "I wonder what you've got in your bag. I'm going to see into this and I'll look at everything you've got - I'll see what you're hiding in the bottom". He laughed so merrily over it and looked at me so artfully that I was much tickled and made out that I was guilty of having something there that was not right. So he pulled everything out and undid everything most carefully watching me out of the corner of his eye the while. Of course if I had objected he would have stopped at once. Presently he came to a pair of socks with a collapsible mug in them and he made a great fuss over it. "Ha! ha!" he said, "I knew you were hiding something." Well only a week ago I remembered this and said "One of these days, young man, I'll go through your belongings and pay you out for examining mine that time." I little knew just under what circumstances I would have to fulfil my threat.

Now "Goodbye" and God be your Comforter.

Yours truly,

No. 14831 (Pte) H.A. Berry

P.S. If there is anything you would like to know further write to me and I shall be only too glad to supply the information.

You cannot help being dreadfully upset but you will be comforted to know that your son and my mate died after doing his duty and more than his duty - a man's death truly. Of us all I really think he was the gamest and he was only a boy after all. He was always very clear headed and always knew what to do when things went wrong. I am not saying all this because he was my mate or because he is your son but because it is true. He was looking so well too these last few weeks and was filling out to be such a big fellow. He was becoming very well liked by the other lads who are all cut up over his loss. He was always happy and bright and never complained of the hardships caused by the excessive cold weather. I used to growl sometimes and say "I will be glad when the warm weather comes" but Eric would say, "Well, it hasn't done us any harm." He had some comical sayings too and used to finish a sentence by saying "What! what!" and if he liked anything he would say "Believe me, some class" and that funny milkman's call has come in very handy. Just lately we were lost and then he got lost from us but presently I heard the call and answered. He could take his own part too quite easily and more than one of our men who thought he was to be "put on" found their mistake. He received a big batch of letters not long ago, but I don't know whether he answered them all - but I think he did. He loved to talk of his home and people and was very fond of you all. Goodbye for the present. Let's hope I'll soon be home again and will, if you like, visit you.

Yours in sympathy,

H.A. BERRY



Bullecourt  
 $\frac{1}{2}$  mile ↗

Dressing Station  
Dug-out.

→ from Ecovert

Railway Embankment.

→ to Queant

+ + + few  
+ scattered  
+ crosses  
here

ERIC'S.

Small Cemetery