

FORGET ME NOT

MARION ILLINGWORTH DAVID FARRER'S GODMOTHER

Marion Illingworth was born on 18th. September, 1881. She died in July 1975. She was born in Bradford, the eldest of eleven children of a prosperous wool merchant who made a serious financial misjudgement by dying early. As a result, having been educated for ladylike idleness, she went to London to train as a nurse at Guys from 1904 - 8.

She was a sister at Guys when the Great War broke out and was in the first group of professional nurses to go to Belgium with the "first hundred thousand". She served in the first field hospitals facing the unprecedented horrors of the retreat from Mons and the fighting at Le Cateau. When I was a child of around nine she described to me the hellish conditions for the wounded, brought in on straw carts, desperately ravaged, faced with a terrible shortage of anaesthetics, medication or the most basic means of cleaning and tending their shattered bodies. She told me - and I can hear her now - how French troops were brought in, already in the death throes of tetanus - "J'ai mal a la gorge ! J'ai mal a la gorge !"

She remained in France until late 1915 when she contracted septicaemia from the infected wounds of those she nursed and was brought back to England with little hope of recovery. But she did. Long before antibiotics, survival was a matter of chance. As a child I gazed in fascination at the part - amputation of her thumb which may have saved her life.



By late 1916 she was back nursing and in 1917, when hopes were high that the USA would join the alliance against the central powers, she was recruited by Jenny Churchill, Winston's mother, to act as matron at the American Officers' hospital in Dorset Square, London. There she remained until some time after the end of the war.

In the 1920's she worked with Marie Stopes, promoting contraception in the desperately impoverished East End and then moved to the Amalgamated Press to edit articles on "women's issues" in women's magazines. There she supervised my mother and they remained close friends to the end of her life.

She was my godmother. I spent a great deal of time with her and her sisters in the late 1940s and 1950s and she spoke with a steely clarity of the sufferings of those she nursed in the Great War. I wish I had been old enough to record her or that, when adult, I had given the time to get down what she recalled. Today we still live in the company of her possessions and her endless notes. She is unforgettable.

"CLIFF"

A TRIBUTE BY DAVID FARRER

As children we called him Grandpa Cliff, though he was no relation. Yet we addressed his tiny indestructible wife Nellie as Mrs. Clifford.

He was a son of the coachman to the Duke of Beaufort and was born around 1880. Inevitably, his early life, of which he spoke only briefly, was stables, horses and long hours mucking out until he became a regular soldier in 1897.

He was shipped out to South Africa in 1899 to fight the Boers and survived the siege of Ladysmith. He became Lord Kitchener's batman, though never getting beyond private, probably due to a dodgy disciplinary record.

He returned to home service when hostilities ended and was still a regular, now in his 30s and still no promotion, when the Great War broke out.

He served on the Western Front from the outset. I believe he was wounded and returned to combat in 1918 but he refused to talk about it even forty years on, not so much, I think, to suppress the horror but because he had a strange disinterest in the past. All he would tell me was that, when demobbed in 1919, he was left to "walk off down the Old Kent Road with ten f...in' shillin' and a jacket that didn't f...in' fit" (A vivid pre - echo of my father's demob suit in 1946.) "Lloyd George? Home fit for heroes?", he railed forty years later, "Fit for my arse !".

He spent the interwar years in and out of work, according to Nellie. She must have had a brutal time of it but she stuck with him. And she had the whip hand.

By the outbreak of the Second World War they lived in a terrace house in Aldershot. His son, Albert and his son - in - law Bill were both regulars by then and Cliff joined the Home Guard but left or was cashiered quite soon. His views on his comrades at this late stage in his military career were readily available fifteen years after the war but predictably unprintable.

It was the war that brought my parents into contact with Cliff and his loyal family. My father was stationed at Aldershot for initial training in 1940 - 41 and my mother had nowhere to stay when she went down from London to visit him. Accommodation was like gold dust. Cliff's daughter, Flo, met her by chance and insisted she came to stay with Flo's parents whenever she was in Aldershot, which she did. She kept up with them when father was subsequently in North Africa. When he was stationed locally again in 1944, prior to the Normandy invasion, they opened their home to my parents once more in such a generous warm - hearted way that our family never forgot it.

After the war we went down to see them regularly. The whole family always turned out to see us and offered a level of hospitality that they could barely afford. Cliff dominated conversation from the chair to which he was by then largely confined. He delighted in teasing my mother with his ripe army language though I think he shocked father more than her. I'm not sure he ever could read properly but he was a most fluent speaker, justifying the simile "swearing like a trooper". He was a real rough diamond, a true survivor. Yet, when friendship was most needed, he and his family were there and gave their all.

Cliff died when I was sixteen. He gave me his Boer War campaign medal. It was lost during a move, a loss I most deeply regret.

