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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK ON THE KING'S SERVICE: INWARD GLIMPSES OF MEN AT ARMS ***

ON THE KING'S SERVICE Inward Glimpses of Men at Arms BY THE REV. INNES LOGAN, M.A.

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CHAPLAIN TO THE FORCES
SEPT. 1914-MAY 1916

HODDER AND STOUGHTON
LONDON NEW YORK TORONTO
MCMXVII

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TO MY WIFE

This little book is written as a slight tribute of love and respect for those with whom the writer had, for over twenty months, the honour of association.

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UNITED FREE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND MANSE, BRAEMAR.

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MUSTERING MEN

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CHAPTER I

MUSTERING MEN

I

Those gaunt unlovely buildings

The War Office built Maryhill Barracks, Glasgow, to look exactly like a gaol, but these gaunt unlovely buildings, packed beyond endurance with men of the new army, were at least in some way in touch with what was happening elsewhere. Even in that first month of the war it seemed callous to be breathing the sweet, clear air of Braemar, or to let one's eyes linger on the matchless beauty of mountain and glen. The grey spire of my church rising gracefully among the silver birches and the dark firs, bosomed deep in purple hills, pointed to some harder way than that. Stevenson, who wrote part of *Treasure Island* here, called it 'the wale (pick) of Scotland,' but just because it was so we saw more clearly the agony of Belgium and the men of our heroic little Regular Army dying to keep us inviolate.

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Up to the 10th of September recruits poured in in such numbers that it was hard to cope with

the situation in the most superficial way. On that date the standard was raised, and, as though a sluice had been dropped across a mill dam, the stream stopped suddenly and completely. I suppose that was the object of the new regulation, but it caused misunderstanding, and to this day the spontaneous rush of the first month of the war has never been repeated. Beyond doubt the numbers were too great to be properly handled. Men slept in the garrison church, in the riding school, on the floor in over-crowded barrack-rooms, in leaky tents without bottoms to them. There were no recreation rooms. It rained a great deal, and once wet a man with no change of clothing or underclothing remained wet for days in his meagre civilian suit. There were too few blankets, no braziers, and the cheap black shoes of civil life were soon in tatters. Everybody became abominably verminous, and though the food was good enough in its way the cooks were overwhelmed, and it was often uneatable. Nobody was to blame, and in an astonishingly short time order began to emerge, but in those early days one enormous 'grouse' went up continually from the new army that was not yet an army, and those conditions were partly responsible for the fact that when the standard was lowered again the flow of recruits was so much less than before. This, the faculty for hearty grouching, in the army whimsical, humorous, shrewd, sometimes biting, never down-hearted, is evidently an old national custom, for Chaucer uses the word half a dozen times. But the aggravated discomfort of men soft from indoor life was really pitiful.

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Before long all recruits except those for the Royal Field Artillery were sent elsewhere, and the barracks became a great depot for this arm of the service, with Colonel Forde in command. What marvels were done in those early days, and how hard pushed the country was, will be realised when it is understood that for months a body of men numbering never less than two thousand, and sometimes as many as three times that number, had only two field guns for training purposes, and that officers had to be sent out to the Expeditionary Force who had worn a uniform only for three, four, or five weeks.

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II

Why the First Hundred Thousand Enlisted

The first hundred thousand had some characteristics of their own compared with their successors. They contained a large number of men who do things on the spur of the moment, the born seekers after adventure, men to whom war had its attractions. Many a man who had never found his place in life, because his was the restless, roving spirit which could not settle, or that chafed against ordered conventional ways, found his happiness at last in August 1914. Alongside those were the men who were passionately patriotic and saw very clearly and quickly the long issues involved to the country they loved. The fate of Belgium had a far more moving influence with the ranks of the new army than the officer class, I think, quite realised. Indeed, with the later recruits I gathered the impression that indignation at the German atrocities in Belgium was the prevailing motive in their enlistment. There can be no question in the mind of any one who worked intimately among the men of the new armies in the autumn and winter of 1914 that the invasion of Belgium was the one shocking stroke that rallied the country as one man, and that nothing else in the situation, as it was known, would have done this. The people as a whole did not grasp the imminence of the German menace. Of the torturing pressure on the thin khaki line that barred the pass to the sea we knew nothing. Day by day and night by night we were regaled with stories of 'heavy German losses' and futile tales of the deaths of German princes; neither our manhood nor our imagination was fully captured, for of the almost unbelievable heroism of our brothers we were never told. Perhaps the silence was justified; the enemy might have learned how near they were to victory, and with a supreme effort have broken through. At all events, unavoidably or not, the youth of the country as a whole was never, throughout this winter, really roused to its best. All the more honour to the first hundred thousand!

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III

Ubique

After this war is over no soldier can ask 'What does the Christian Church do for me?' The members of the Church, acting through its organisation, or more frequently through other organisations of which its members were the moving spirits, rose to the occasion nobly all over the country. Glasgow was no exception. It did the Churches, too, much good, teaching them to work together. Here is an example. The men were lodged all over the city, two or three hundred in one hall, more than that in another. In every instance arrangements were made for their recreation and comfort. In a given district one congregation gave its hall as a recreation room, another paid all expenses, a third supplied a church officer for daily cleaning, the members joined in giving magazines and papers, and in providing tea and coffee; the missionary of one congregation held services, and all united in giving concerts. The Y.M.C.A., which does not accept workers unless they are members of the Christian Church, came on the scene and built a hut, through the generosity of Mrs. Hunter Craig, in the barrack square.

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On this, in the early months of 1915, there followed a revival of religion among the Maryhill Barracks men, whose centre was the Y.M.C.A. hut. This revival had the marks in it which we younger men had been told were the marks of a true revival, but from which many had shrunk

because they were associated in our days with flaming advertisement, noise, and ostentation.

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A wise old Scots minister was once asked, 'How are we to bring about a revival?' 'It is God who gives revival.' 'But how are we to get Him to give it?' 'Ask Him,' he said. Perhaps in this case we may say humbly that our asking was largely in the form of gaining the confidence of the men, for when we had all become friends the movement began quietly one night through the action of an agent of the Pocket Testament League, who was spending the evening with us. The meetings looked prosaic enough to the eye; there was no band or solo singing or outward excitement, and the hut was a plain wooden building, but the strain was very intense at times. Sometimes as many as a hundred in one week would stay behind and profess conversion, desiring to yield to the profound spiritual impulse urging them from within to make Christ's mind and spirit their principle in life. All had been cast loose from their moorings and had been trying to find their feet in new surroundings. Most of them were just decent lads who had never thought much about it before. There were others who at last saw a chance to make a fresh start and grasped thankfully at it. A few were 'corner-boys,' learning in discipline and comradeship a lesson they had never dreamed of. I think there was everywhere in the new army a certain moral uplift arising from the consciousness of a hard duty undertaken, and it was not difficult to lead this on to a more personal and spiritual crisis. There was something very lovable about them. A tall, handsome fellow from a Canadian lumber camp said, with real distress in his face, 'I've tried and tried, and God help me, I can't. It's no use.' His chum tucked his arm through his and declared with a warmth of affection in his voice, 'I'll look after him, guv'nor.'

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Many months afterwards in a Flemish town I saw some of their batteries go by clattering over the stony streets. The flashlight from an electric torch lit up the riders flitting from darkness to darkness on either side of the broad pencil of light. It showed bronzed faces, competent gestures, stained uniforms, the marks of veterans, men who had been in action many times with their guns. I am sure that they do their duty not only to their king but to One Higher, too, in the words of the brave motto of their corps, '*Ubique quo fas et gloria ducunt.*'

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In April orders came to join the Expeditionary Force.

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A REINFORCEMENTS CAMP

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CHAPTER II

A REINFORCEMENTS CAMP

I

The Sunny Valley

The reinforcements camp lay pleasantly in a sunny valley. The nearest town was Harfleur, besieged exactly five hundred years earlier by Henry v. of England, who placed his chief reliance on his big guns and his mines and was not disappointed. The camp commandant was insistent that the ground round the tents and huts should be turned into gardens, and before long the valley was bright with flowers. There was peace over all the landscape here. Sometimes a train of horse trucks, crowded with men standing at the sliding doors or sitting with legs dangling over the rails, panted up the long slope past the foot of the valley, and every evening the supply trains pulled slowly off on their way to the front, each laden with one day's rations for twelve thousand men. Fresh drafts for the infantry and artillery arrived every day, stayed a few days, and then were sent up the line. Probably a thousand men a month would be a fair estimate for the wastage from a division at that time, that is, the whole Expeditionary Force had to be renewed completely once a year, as far as its fighting units were concerned. Drafts therefore were continually passing through our camp, and I had many opportunities of studying the morale of individuals of all ranks. The result was interesting and worth setting down. My experience was that the good heart of young able-bodied men engaged in occupations, on the lines of communications and at the base, which might have been carried through effectively by others. These young men never were in danger, while those who happened to have enlisted in combatant corps were sent back to face death again and again. This (we are told) has now been rectified, but it was for long a source of great soreness. The second influence making for soreness was the amazing amount of wrangling that went on at home, among the newspapers, between masters and men, and so on. Officers would get furious with the conduct of the 'workers,' and condemn them wholesale as a class. One had to be at once cautious and persistent in bringing home to them the fact that their own men, whom they admired and loved, whom they knew would follow them anywhere, were drawn from

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just the same class as those men who were out on strike. Another reason why it would have been better to have had older men and married men at the bases lay in the temptations surrounding the men there on every side. These also have to be reckoned with as part of the inevitable cost of war. It says much for the grit and character of the average Briton that so many come through unscathed.

II

The Man from Skye

As I was going round the tents one day I had a long talk with a man in a draft just leaving for the front to join a Highland regiment. He had not been long out of hospital, and, like his companions, had scarcely pulled himself together after the sadness of a second farewell. Following a good plan of always handing on any rumour, however improbable, which is of a thoroughly cheerful nature I said, referring to a report that was current in the messes that morning, 'They say Lord Kitchener says it will be all over by September.' He looked at me very seriously and said sternly, 'It iss not for Lord Kitchener to say when the war will be over. It iss only for God to say that.' Presently he said, 'And what iss more, I will nefer see Skye again.' I had tried every way in vain to lift his foreboding from him, and now I said sternly like himself, 'It is not for you to say whether you will ever see Skye again; only God can know that.' He moved a little, restlessly, and answered slowly, 'Yess, that iss so, but—yess, it iss so.' Sometimes when we were asking one another that old familiar unanswerable question I would tell the story of the man from Skye and his answer to the problem. We were very glad to hear a few weeks later that he had been discharged as permanently unfit, and was by then in his loved misty isle.

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The Principal Chaplain visited the camp during my chaplaincy there. The Rev. Dr. Simms, who ranks as a major-general, has charge of all chaplains other than those of the Church of England. His tall, distinguished, unassuming figure will always stand, in the minds of those who were under his administration, for infinite kindness, wisdom, and scrupulous fairness between all parties. Dr. Wallace Williamson of St. Giles', Edinburgh, who was visiting the troops in France, accompanied him. Their service on Sunday was very moving. Hearts were near the surface in those brief days between the farewell and the battlefield. The three Scotsmen whom I knew best of those who were at this service are all dead: one fell at Loos, one in Mesopotamia, and one on the Somme. The oldest of them, who was an officer in a Guards battalion, could not speak and his eyes were full of tears. There was no possibility here of the remark that one Lowlander made to another after listening to a very celebrated London preacher: 'Aye, it was beautiful, and he cud mak' ye see things too, whiles; but, man! there was nae *logic* in 't.'

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It was about this time that we heard of the sinking of the *Lusitania*. Somehow from this moment we knew better where we were and for what we fought. Every one's thoughts were very grim. This was sheer naked wickedness done plainly and coldly in the sight of God and man.

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III

'You can hear them now'

One broiling afternoon as I sat talking with a friend in my tent an orderly came to the door and said to him, 'Message for you, sir.' He glanced at it. It was his orders to join his battalion at the front. We shook hands and he went off, glad to be on the move again after hanging about waiting so long. In five minutes the orderly was back with orders for me to proceed at once to the 2nd London Territorial Casualty Clearing Station. I said good-bye to Adams, my servant. No man was ever more fortunate in his batmen—Adams, a typical regular, fiercely proud of his regiment; Campion, the London Territorial, a commercial traveller in civil life; and Munro, the Royal Scot, who within a month or two of the outbreak of war could no longer suppress the fighting spirit of the Royal Regiment stirring within him, and voluntarily rejoined, leaving a wife and six children behind him. He was a foreman in the Edinburgh Tramways Company. Handy man that he was, he could turn his hand to anything, whether it was devising a ferrule for a broken walking stick out of the screw of a pickle bottle, or making a bleak-looking hut habitable, or producing hot tea from nowhere, or transforming a wet-canteen marquee into a decent place for Communion (empty tobacco boxes for table, beer barrels discreetly out of sight), or building a pulpit out of sandbags in the corner of a roofless saloon bar.

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The supply train left at a very early hour, and by devious routes reluctantly approached the railhead. The journey took thirty hours. It was long enough to teach the lessons never to go on a military train in France without something to read, or to drink rashly from an aluminium cup containing hot liquid, or to rely on bully beef as a sole article of diet. Towards evening the Irishman in charge of the train had pity and took me along—we had stopped for the thirty-fifth time—to admire his Primus stove in full blast, and to share his excellent dinner. But (stove or no stove) the world is divided into those who can do that sort of thing and those who cannot; who, wrestling futilely with refractory elements, wish they had never been born.

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He said that before we reached the railhead we would probably hear the sound of the guns. The phrase is used to barrenness, even to ridicule, but the reality when first heard rings a new emotion in your breast. The night was windless and warm, and about ten o'clock as we stood in a

wayside station the Ulsterman came up to me and said, 'Listen, you can hear them now.' And away to the east could be heard a deep shaking sound rising and fading away in the still air—the sound of British artillery fighting day and night against yet overwhelming odds.

Twenty hours later, after many wanderings, a friendly Field Ambulance car deposited me at the door of the mess of the clearing station, where the arrival of a 'Scotch minister' had been awaited with a good deal of curiosity and possibly some apprehension.

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A CLEARING STATION WHEN THERE IS 'NOTHING TO REPORT'

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CHAPTER III

A CLEARING STATION WHEN THERE IS 'NOTHING TO REPORT'

I

From Parapet to Base

We sometimes hear of some man who with leg smashed continues firing his machine-gun as though nothing had happened. How is this to be explained? The answer is one that is a real comfort to those at home. The most shattering wounds are not those which cause the greatest immediate pain. It is as though a tree fell across telegraph wires. The wires are down, and no message, or, at worst, a confused jangling message can come through to the brain. I have known a man carried into an aid-post in a state of great delight because he had 'got a Blighty one.' He lay smoking and talking, little realising that his wound was so grave that it would be many months before he could walk again—if indeed he would ever walk with two legs. By the time the realisation of the pain has come into full play the sufferer, in ordinary times, is in the clearing station or, at least, the field ambulance, and has the resources of science at his disposal.

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Suppose that at three in the afternoon Jock is hit, in the front trench. 'Jock' is the name universally given to Scottish soldiers, Lowland or Highland. It is not a melodious name, but there it is! And it somehow expresses the Scotsman's character better than 'Tommy' does. He cannot be carried down the communication trench because it zigzags too much: he cannot be got round the angles. So he is taken into a dug-out and gets first aid, and a tablet of morphine perhaps. The M.O. may possibly come up to see him, but he may be too busy in his own aid-post. There are stretcher bearers in the trench able to bandage properly. The average 'S.B.' by the way, is a man from the battalion, not from the R.A.M.C. As soon as it is dark the stretcher bearers lift him and carry him across the open to the aid-post, which is perhaps five hundred or a thousand yards behind the firing trench, near the battalion headquarters. It is an eerie journey, with a certain amount of risk. The brilliant Boche flares rise continually—the enemy is sometimes called 'the Hun,' more often 'the Boche,' in more genial moments 'Fritz,' but 'the Germans' never—and light up the ground vividly. These flares are very powerful. I have seen my own shadow cast from one when standing at the time in a camp fully five miles from the trenches, and when you are close up you feel that every eye in 'Germany' is fixed on you. The best thing to do is to stand quite still, for artificial light is very deceptive, and it is hard to make out what an object is. In any case, the real danger area is 'No-Man's-Land,' for it is on that mighty graveyard stretching from Switzerland to the sea that the enemy's eyes are bent. The regiments used to get various kinds of flares to experiment with. We used to laugh over an incident that occurred when a new type, a species of parachute, had been served out. The Second-in-command, who fired it, miscalculated the strength of the wind, which was blowing from the enemy's trench, and the flare was carried in a stately curve backwards until it was directly over battalion headquarters. Here it hung for a long time, showing up all details very successfully, to the C.O.'s great annoyance. Over this ground, very slowly and carefully, the stretcher is carried. When the aid-post is reached the M.O. takes charge, assisted by the sergeant or corporal of the R.A.M.C., whom he has always with him, and the 'casualty' is laid alongside others in the dug-out, or cellar beneath some ruined house, that forms the aid-post and battalion dispensary. The first stage in the journey is now over. Soon a couple of cars creep quietly up. One by one the casualties are lifted in or climb in stiffly. The doctor who has come up with them chats with the M.O., and the local gossip is exchanged for the wider knowledge (or more grandiose rumours) of the field ambulance. Our Jock, who has a bullet in his chest, is lifted in. Straps are fastened securely and tarpaulins tied. 'All aboard, sir!' 'Right! Well, so long, Hadley!' 'Cheero, Scott!' The ambulances start very cautiously, and crawl up the road. It is in execrable condition, for work in daylight here is impossible. It is all knocked to pieces with traffic, and frequently pitted with shell holes, and as a rule very narrow. There is no

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moon, which is just as well, and no lights can be carried. The driver feels his way through inky blackness by some sixth sense begotten of many such journeys. Every now and then a flare lights up the broken cobbles for a few seconds. His wheels are only a couple of feet from the mud on either side, and if he goes into that the car would be there for hours. A little to the right a battery of 18-pounders is firing slowly and regularly, and the shells scream over the road on their way to the enemy. A corner is turned and the road gets better. We draw up at a building with no light showing, and R.A.M.C. orderlies come up the steps from a cellar. This is the advanced dressing station; it collects from a brigade front and there are two doctors at work. A large window covered with sacking opens at the level of the ground into the cellar, and the wounded are lifted through it. Some will stay here all night, but the most seriously hurt are sent on to the casualty clearing station five or six miles back. Hot drinks are going and are welcome, for the injured men are trembling and sick with shock. Two new drivers come up from their dug-out, yawning, and take over; a message has just come in that the 'P' trenches have been 'hotted' by trench mortars and cars must go back again at once. The ambulances move off, leaving the doctors busy, sleeves rolled up to the elbow. The second stage in the journey has been completed.

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The cars are moving much more quickly now. Lights are still burning in divisional headquarters, but the field ambulance headquarters are dark, save for the lamp burning before the gate. An ambulance may have two or three advanced dressing stations collecting from a divisional front. Twin lamps on a pole, white and red, draw nearer and faintly light up two flags, the Union Jack and the Red Cross. The Union Jack in Flanders is only seen in conjunction with the Red Cross, or perhaps over the dead body at a funeral; unless the Commander-in-chief comes round, when the flag is carried behind him on a lance. The cars turn at right angles into a gravelled yard and draw up before a large door. A corporal, who has been sitting in a glass vestibule, puts his head inside the inner door and shouts 'Stretcher bearers!' An orderly crosses quickly to the office and reports to the orderly officer, 'Two cars with stretcher cases.' The doctor crosses to the reception room and begins to examine the first case. The reception room is a concert or music hall in happier days. Its stage is the dispensary, and the little room where the performers 'make-up' is the mortuary. The doctor is joined by the sister on night duty. Each man is examined rapidly in turn. The M.O., or the doctor at the dressing station, has written some words about the nature of the wound on a label very like a luggage label, and this has been tied to a button-hole. An orderly comes forward and takes down particulars: name, number, battalion, brigade, division. Jock is rather tired of giving this information because he has already had it taken down by his M.O., and at the dressing station. But he need not begin to complain yet, for it will be repeated at every stopping-place. He is carried off to another room. The third stage is over.

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Jock is here a fortnight, for he is badly wounded and occupies one of the few beds that the station boasts. One day he is borne, rather white, into the operating theatre, and after a time is carried back, even whiter than before. He has seen less of it than any one; saw only the white walls and the mosquito curtains; smelled the heavy odours of ether and chloroform and antiseptics; heard faintly and more faintly the drone of an aeroplane overhead; saw also the padre, rather white too, but determined to get accustomed to this sort of thing, in case they should be short-handed when the great 'push' comes.

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Jock cannot go by train because he could not stand the jolting, so he must wait for a barge. He listens with evident pleasure to the description of the electric lights and fans and white sheets and pillows. There are six sisters in the station. They are the first English women he has seen since his last leave, and he is glad to hear there will be two on the barge. A barge comes and goes, but no one tells Jock that. He is told the barges are always a long time coming, which is true too. And, indeed, before the next one comes he is so much better that it is decided he can go by train if it comes first. It does come first. '*Train in!*' runs through the wards like lightning. There are hurried good-byes, gathering together of souvenirs, wistful eyes of those who cannot yet go, watching those who can. Cars are brought round to the side entrance, stretchers slipped into their grooves, and the convoy is off to the station. The long train, already half filled, lies waiting. There is a last little passage across the platform, coming and going of bearers, the inevitable argument with the R.T.O., a warning shriek from the engine, and the train to the base has gone.

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II

'Do you think that sort of thing matters now?'

A clearing station is just what its name denotes. It clears the wounded from a large number of field ambulances, each of which is split into several advanced dressing stations. Each of these in turn draws from several aid-posts. All the wounded, and all the sick who get beyond the ambulances, must pass through the station. There they are put in trim for the journey to the base, or are sent to a convalescent depot if a week or two will see them fit for duty again.

The Church of England chaplain was as friendly and accommodating as I was anxious to be. We made sure that one of us saw every man to speak to when he was brought in, and noted to which ward he was taken. For the distribution of writing-paper, newspapers, and magazines, tobacco and cigarettes, we divided the work, so that in one day each took half the number of wards, on the next day reversing the half. In the case of serious illness or trouble we kept more closely to our own men. We both had our store of Testaments. Of all editions supplied to the

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troops that of the National Bible Society of Scotland is the best. It is the most attractive, in its bright red binding—one gets so tired of khaki—and it contains the Psalms, so priceless and unflinching in time of war. I think it a pity that they are in the metrical rather than the prose form. On the other hand, an officer once told me he found it impossible to settle to read the Bible. His experience was that a booklet of familiar hymns was of most spiritual value to him. He would pull it out in his dug-out and read a verse, and then put it back again. On Sundays we held our morning services separately, in the reception room at different hours. If it was possible there might be one or two quiet services in the wards as well. Religion and science are sometimes supposed to be hostile to one another. I must say this, and say it gratefully—I always found doctors sympathetic, helpful, and considerate, no men more so, in fact, none could have been more entirely friendly. They are not lovers of creeds, but they are devoted servants of humanity, and singularly responsive to any practical desire to be of help. In the evening we held a united service. When the Presbyterian gave the address the service was Anglican, and next Sunday the service would be Presbyterian and the Church of England chaplain spoke. We took our funerals to that so quickly growing cemetery with its six hundred little wooden crosses, separately, though up the road those from the other clearing station were taken by each chaplain on alternate days, irrespective of denomination. We dispensed the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper to our own people, using the beautiful little Communion set issued by the War Office, and having as Table a stretcher covered with a white cloth and set on trestles.

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The drawing power of nationality is immense in the field. It is far more emphatic and real than the sense of particular church connection. Even men very loyal to their own branch of the Presbyterian Church, for example, lay little emphasis on that in their minds. They delight in meeting a Scots doctor or Scots padre. He understands all the twined fibres of tradition and training that go to make up their character. Every man, too, likes to worship according to the forms that he is familiar with. But Church of Scotland, or United Free Church of Scotland, and so on, is all very much the same to him. I am speaking of Christian men, of men quite aware of the historical situation. There grows upon a man in the field a deeper love for his brother Scot, so profound a sense of essential oneness in tradition, in history, in character, in faith, that he comes to look forward eagerly, *passionately*, to a blessed day of complete reconciliation.

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'Do you think that sort of thing matters now, Padre?' whispered a boy who was desperately wounded, his skeleton hand picking restlessly at the counterpane—a fine time for all our sound arguments! 'That sort of thing' does matter, of course, but *then* what could matter save to rest wearily in the Everlasting Arms. I cannot believe that any one who has knelt beside life after life passing forth in weariness and pain, cut short so untimely, far from mothers' hands that would have ministered love to them as they lay, and who has listened to the broken words of trust, will ever allow his vision of the fundamental union of those who are resting in the Eternal Love of God in Christ to be overshadowed by lesser truths.

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III

The Name of Jesus

There are two periods in a soldier's life when he is especially alert to the appeal of religion. One, as we have seen, is just after enlisting; the other is after he has been wounded. A clearing station is the first resting-place he has. He has had a terrible shaking, seen his chum killed perhaps, taken part in savagery let loose. He is often all broken up, seeking again for a foundation. The difficulty is that his stay is so short, as a rule only a few days. Our record patient was poor Burke, an Irishman from an Irish regiment. He had been wounded when out with a wiring party which scattered under machine-gun fire. He crawled into a Jack Johnson hole and lay there out of sight of either side, between the trenches, for eight days and eight nights. He had a little biscuit and a water bottle, nothing more. Shells screamed overhead or burst near, and bullets whistled backwards and forwards over the shell-hole. There were dead men near in all stages of decay. When he was discovered by a patrol he had lain there for over two hundred hours, and he was not insane. We speak lightly of 'more dead than alive.' He was literally that when he was brought in. Gangrene had set in long ago, and his condition was beyond description. Surgeon-generals and consulting surgeons came long distances to see him, an unparalleled example of the tenacity of human life. He lingered by a thread for many weeks, sometimes a little better, more often shockingly ill; but at last, six weeks after admission, it was decided he could be moved. The whole station came to say good-bye to old Burke, and all who could went to see him lowered gently by the lift into the barge. Later, we had letters to say that he had survived the amputation of his leg, and was slowly recovering. But that was the longest period that any patient stayed with us. Short as the time generally was, however, it was sometimes long enough to become very intimate, since both were so ready to meet. There is not, and never has been a religious revival, in the usual sense of the term, on the Flanders front, and I am afraid it is true that modern war knocks and smashes any faith he ever had out of many a man. Yet in a hospital there is much ground for believing that shining qualities which amid the refinements of civilisation are often absent—staunch, and even tender comradeship, readiness to judge kindly if judge at all, resolute endurance, and absence of self-seeking, so typical of our fighting men—have their root in a genuine religious experience more often than is, in the battalions, immediately evident. It has been my experience, again and again, that with dying men who have sunk into the last lethargy, irresponsive to every other word, the Name of Jesus still can penetrate and arouse. The hurried breathing becomes for a moment regular, or the eyelids flicker, or the hand faintly

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THE AFTERMATH OF LOOS

CHAPTER IV

THE AFTERMATH OF LOOS

I

The Flavour of Victory

The jolliest man in the field is the man who, so to say, has been safely wounded, that is, whose wound is serious enough to take him right down the line, with a good prospect of crossing to Blighty, but not so serious as to cause anxiety. I never met so hilarious a crowd as the first batch of wounded from the fighting of 25th September 1915. We had been prepared for a 'rush.' The growling of the guns had for days past been growing deeper and more extended. It is, as a matter of fact, impossible to keep a future offensive concealed. The precise time and place may be unknown, but the gathering together of men, the piling up of ammunition, and the necessary preparations for great numbers of wounded, advertise inevitably that something is afoot. The ranks are not slow to read the signs of the times: they say, for example, that an inspection by the divisional-general can only mean one thing. How much crosses to the other side it is hard to say, but the local inhabitants know all that is common talk, and sometimes a great deal more. They have eyes in their heads; they can see practice charges being carried through, and note which regiments carry battle-marks on their uniforms; and the little shops and estaminets are just soldiers' clubs where gossip is 'swapped' as freely as in the London west-end clubs, and unfortunately, is much better informed. A woman working on a farm once told me to what part of the line a certain division was going on returning from rest, and she gave a date. The commanding officers of the battalions concerned knew nothing of it, and indeed a quite contrary rumour was in circulation, but time proved the old woman to be right.

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The Loos offensive was no exception, and for many days anxious thoughts and prayers had filled our hearts. We went from hope to despondency, and back to hope again. I dare say the talk round the mess table was very foolish. Compared with the earlier days of the war the country seemed full of men, and we heard stories of great accumulation of ammunition. Anything seemed possible.

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By nine o'clock on the morning of the 25th the convoys were coming in, and the wounded streamed into the reception room. They were 'walking cases,' men who had been wounded in the early part of the attack and, able to walk, had made their way on foot to the regimental aid-post. All had been going well when they left. They were bubbling over with good spirits and excitement. Three—four—no, five lines of trenches had been taken and 'the Boche was on the run.' They joked and laughed and slapped one another on the back, and indeed this jovial crowd presented an extraordinary appearance, caked and plastered with mud, with tunics ripped and blood-stained, with German helmets, black or grey, stuck on the back of their heads, and amazing souvenirs 'for the wife.' One man with a rather guilty glance round produced for my private inspection from under his coat an enormous silver crucifix about a foot long. He found it in a German officer's dug-out, but probably it came originally from some ruined French chapel. All souvenirs taken from dead enemies are loathsome to me. It is merciful that so many people have no imagination. I have never been able to understand, either, the carrying home of bits of shell and mementoes of that kind. Any memento of these unspeakable scenes of bloodshed is repulsive. Yet the British soldier is as chivalrous as he is brave. He speaks terrible words about what he will do to his foes, but when they are beaten and in his power he can never carry it through. This was very striking when you consider that until quite recently the German was 'top-dog' and how much our men had suffered at his hands. But once the fight is over he is ready to regard their individual account as settled. I remember so well one fire-eating officer who was going to teach any prisoners that came into his hands what British sternness meant. In due course twenty wounded Prussians came in. He was discovered next day actually distributing cigarettes to them. Now we must recollect that the British Tommy is not a class apart; he is simply the 'man in the street,' the people. Sometimes there is savage bitterness, not without good reason, and frequently the sullen or frightened temper of the prisoners made friendliness difficult, but Tommy—and by that name I mean the British citizen under arms—does not long nourish grudges when the price has been paid. He is essentially chivalrous, and even to his enemy, when the passion of fighting or the strain of watchfulness is past, he is incurably kind.

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An atmosphere of hope and cheerfulness pervaded the clearing station this first morning of the 'great offensive.' Passing through a ward I said to the nurse, 'Well, sister, everything seems to be going splendidly.' She looked up sombrely from the wound she was dressing and replied, 'So they said in the first hours of Neuve Chapelle.' I was chilled by what she said and felt angry with her.

II

Doubts and Fears

As the day wore on the news was not so good. The Meerut Division, which had delivered the containing attack in front of us on the Moulin du Pietre, was where it had been before it attacked, so the wounded said, with the exception of some units, notably Leicesters and Black Watch, who had apparently disappeared. Perhaps all that had been intended had been achieved. After all, the real battle—none could be more real and more costly to those taking part in it than a containing attack, forlorn hope as it often is—the *decisive* battle was further south at Loos. But the changed mood of the wounded now coming in was noticeable. Our fighting men hate to be beaten, and the story was of confusion and lack of support. Our own gas, too, had lingered on the ground and then drifted back on our own trenches. A young German student who was brought in wounded admitted the gallantry of the first rush, but he said, 'We always understood those trenches could be rushed, but we also know that they cannot be held on so small a front. They are commanded on either side.' In all seven hundred wounded and gassed were brought in from the British regiments of this division, and there was much work to be done.

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Sunday was a bright, warm day, and in the afternoon we gathered all who could walk to a service in the green meadow behind the operating theatre. (There, too, they were busy enough, God knows.) The men came very willingly. I spoke a few words from the text 'Blessed are the peacemakers,' for that benediction was meant also for those lads who had just struck so brave a blow for a decent world. A gunner said afterwards, 'Do you know, I have only heard two sermons since I came out ten months ago. The other was by the Bishop of London, and he took the same text!' It is, as a matter of fact, very difficult to serve the gunners properly; they were so scattered in little groups. It was very peaceful that Sunday afternoon—no sign of war anywhere, except the maimed results of it—as those men remembered with tears those whom it had 'pleased Almighty God to take out of this transitory world into His mercy.'

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Every wounded man has a letter to write or to have written for him, and it was essential that since the people at home knew there was heavy fighting going on all messages should be sent off at once. This is one of the chaplain's voluntary tasks, and we were kept close to it every afternoon for some weeks after the offensive began. For some time the number of letters was about four hundred every day. A number of men had written farewell letters—very moving they seemed, but I did not think it part of my duty to look too closely at these. They had addressed them and then put them in their pockets, hoping that if they were killed they might be discovered. Some had been finished just before the order to go over the parapet. But the curious thing was that these were sent home, with a few words in a covering note saying they were alive and well, as a sort of keepsake. In those written after arrival in hospital a sense of gratitude to God was very frequent, and a great longing for home and the children. Some strange phrases were used: a mother would be addressed as 'Dear old face,' or simply 'Old face.' But poets used to write verses to their mistresses' eyebrows, and why not a letter to a mother's face?

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The German prisoners sent a message asking if they might speak with the *Hauptmann-Pfarrer*. They besought me to send word to their relatives that they were safe. I took the full particulars and promised to ask the Foreign Office to forward, but could not guarantee the messages getting through, as their government was behaving very badly over the matter. They were all very anxious that I should be sure and say their wounds were slight (*leicht*).

Next day came urgent orders that all wounded were to be evacuated who could possibly be moved. So far as we had heard events seemed to be moving fairly well at Loos, but there were some ugly rumours and the atmosphere was one of great uneasiness. After dinner that evening the commanding officer, Major Frankau, took me aside, and asked me not to go to bed as they would need every available pair of hands throughout the night.

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III

Our Share of the Fifty Thousand

It was ten o'clock when the first cars came crunching into the station yard, and the convoys arrived one after another until five in the morning. Then, as we could take in no more, the stream was diverted to the other clearing station up the road. Before the war the deep hoot of a car always seemed to say: 'Here am I, rich and rotund, rolling comfortably on my way; I have laid up much goods and can take mine ease'; but after that night it had another meaning: 'Slowly, tenderly, oh! be pitiful. I am broken and in pain,' as the cars crept along over the uneven roads. These were our share of the wounded from Loos, the overflow of serious 'stretcher cases' who could not be taken in at the already overworked stations immediately behind their own front. Many had been lying on the battlefield many hours. They were for the most part from the 15th (Scottish) Division and the 47th (London) Division. Both had made a deathless name. The former

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got further forward than any other, and paid the penalty with over six thousand casualties. All this night the rain fell in torrents. It streamed from the tops and sides of the ambulances, it lashed the yard till it rose in a fine spray; the lamps shone on wetness everywhere—the dripping, anxious faces of the drivers, the pallid faces of the wounded, eyes staring over their drenched brown blankets, eyes puzzled in their pain and distress, like those of hunted animals; and the reception room was filled with the choking odours of steaming dirty blankets and uniforms, of drying human bodies and of wounds and mortality. As each ambulance arrived the stretchers, their occupants for the most part silent, were drawn gently out and carried into the reception hall and laid upon the floor. At once each man—the nature of whose wounds permitted it—was given a cup of hot tea or of cold water, and a cigarette. Two by two they were lifted on to the trestles, and examined and dressed by the surgeons. Their fortitude was, as one of the surgeons said to me, uncanny. It was supernatural. I could not have believed what could be endured without complaint, often without even a word to express the horrid pain, unless I had seen it. Amid all that battered, bleeding, shattered flesh and bone, the human spirit showed itself a very splendid thing that night. The reception room at last filled to overflowing and could not be emptied. All the wards and lofts and tents were crammed. By the time the other station was filled the two had taken in three thousand men. They remained with us for a week, because the hospital trains were too busy behind Loos to come our way. Every day every man had to have his wounds dressed. Some were covered with wounds; many of the wounds were dangerous, all were painful; and gas gangrene, which the surgeon so hates to see, had to be fought again and again. The medical staff, seven in number, worked on day after day, and night after night, skilfully, tenderly, ruthlessly. There were also a great many operations, and scores of difficult critical decisions.

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As we stepped out from among the blanketed forms I thought bitterly of the 'glory' of war. Yet if there was any glory in war this was it. It was here, in this patient suffering and obedience. These men might well glory in their infirmities. This was heroism, the real thing, the spirit rising to incredible heights of patient endurance in the foreseen possible result of positive action for an ideal. The reaction from battle is overwhelming. Passions that the civilised man simply does not know, so colourless is his experience of them in ordinary days, are let loose, anger and terror and horror and lust to kill. So for a while, as nearly always happens, even wounds lost their power to pain in the sleep of bottomless exhaustion. Those who could not sleep were drugged with morphine. The moaning never stopped, but rose and fell and rose again. It shook my heart. We turned from the ashen faces and went out into the grey morning light. Everything seemed very grey. A mist was drawing up slowly from the sluggish Lys, and we wondered as we went shivering through it across the soaked grass what was happening beyond it over there at Loos.

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Next afternoon at tea we were all cheered by the news that a man who had had his leg taken off three hours before was asking for a penny whistle. At last it was discovered that one of the cooks had one. (Cooks in the army are a race apart, possessors of all kinds of strange accomplishments.) It was willingly handed over, and soon the strains of 'Annie Laurie' were rising softly from a cot in Ward VIII.

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A month later the Principal Chaplain asked me to go to a battalion. Chaplains who had been through the previous winter with battalions were not anxious for another winter of it, if fresh men could be found. I was thankful to go, in spite of all the kindness there had been on every hand and the friendships made. The devilish ingenuity of wounds was getting the better of me.

My charge was a brigade, containing a battalion of the Gordon Highlanders, with which I was directed to mess. But the day I joined, this battalion was taken out of the brigade, and as soon as the rearrangement was completed I was transferred to one of the battalions of The Royal Scots. While I was with this unit both its commanding officer and its adjutant were changed. In both cases the cause was the promotion of the officer in question.

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DUMBARTON'S DRUMS

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CHAPTER V

DUMBARTON'S DRUMS

I

Back Again!

The landing of the British Expeditionary Force in the far-away days of August 1914 was one of the great moments of history. And Scotland has a special share in the pride and sorrow that surround that great day, for in her premier regiment centred memories of warfare and endurance, of ancient alliances and ancient enmities, without a parallel in the story of any other regular regiment. The oldest regiment in Europe was on the battlefield once again. The First, or

Royal Regiment of Foot, now known as The Royal Scots, when it climbed the steep streets of Boulogne, marched on a soil sacred to it by the memories of heroic campaigns. Names that were as yet unfamiliar to the world at large were dear to it as the last resting-places of its comrades of long ago—names such as Dunkirk and Dixmude, Furnes and Ypres, Saberne and Bar-le-Duc. Hepburn's Regiment had fought over every foot of the ground on which it was now to share the waging of the greatest of all campaigns. Dumbarton's Drums were once more beating their way through Europe to the making of history. The trust of Gustavus Adolphus and Turenne, of Marlborough and Wellington, marched with them as the promise of victory; and from the old Royals, dustily climbing the cobbled street, spoke all the glamour of 'age-kept victories.'

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France was a smiling land in those days, for the sun shone in the hearts of Frenchwomen as the rumour of war rose from the anxiously expected British columns and drifted across the shining August fields. The 2nd battalion—the 1st was still in India—tramped cheerily on its way. To no one then was there revealed that dreary vista of trenches that was to be war to the mind of the modern soldier.

II

The First Shock of War

Mons and the 23rd of August saw The Royals in action. With other battalions they occupied the Mons salient, actually the point on which the torrent of war first broke and for a brief moment spent itself. On that still night it seemed to hang suspended as a great wave does before falling. As the battalion lay in the shallow trench the pregnant silence was at last broken by the high, clear call of a bugle, one single long note, indescribably eerie and menacing, and then the listening men heard the rustling tread of feet moving through the grass with a steady, regular, ominous advance. The might of Germany was on the move, and still the thin brown line lay tense and silent, until only forty paces separated the two. Then, at a word, The Royals' line broke into a storm of flame which swept the line of the advancing men as a scythe sweeps through the corn; and for the British infantry the great war had begun.

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Mons was a victory; the German advance was held up temporarily. But all night the British troops were being withdrawn. It was after five in the morning before The Royals got their orders to move, and 'A' Company claims to be the last of the British army to leave Mons. But Le Cateau was another story. Here our men learned what the concentrated fire of artillery could be. The shallow trenches were obliterated; our gunners, hopelessly outclassed in weight and number of pieces, could do little, in spite of the greatest gallantry, to protect the infantry; and that the army was able to withdraw at all was a striking proof of its stern discipline. Audencourt was a shambles. Colonel McMicking, wounded near this village and left behind, as all the wounded who were unable to walk had to be, was hit again while being carried out of the blazing church. The command devolved on Major, now Brigadier-General, Duncan. From this time onwards the German guns had the range of the roads, and such a superiority of fire that they could do almost as they pleased. The infantry, at first furious at the necessity of retreat, turned again and again—as did the guns—on their pursuers, but even so the pressure was perilously near breaking point. The enemy had every means of mechanical transport, and was able to find time for rest. Our men had to press on to the last point of human endurance. There was no respite. The French Foreign Legion have a grim saying, 'March or die.' Here the word was 'March or be captured,' and even when every other conscious feeling but that of utter exhaustion seemed dead, somewhere deep down in their hearts the will to endure urged them on.

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Is there no painter, no poet, who can enshrine for future generations the memory of this historic scene? We have here a sudden glimpse of Britain at her best. Hot sun, torment of burning feet on the cruel, white, and endless roads, the odour and sight and sound of death and wounds, pressure of pressing men, and love of life and the horrid loneliness of fear—all that was Giant Circumstance; but he could not extinguish the souls of men made in the image of God for suffering and endurance and triumph. English and Irish and Scottish—but brothers in hatred of retreat and in their determination to push on until they could turn and strike—the glamour of great names hung round all those tattered battalions; and the very essence of it was in the oldest of them all, in history and in campaigns, this famous Lowland regiment. Of that at such a time they thought little, if at all; sheer physical facts pressed too hard, yet in their desperate victory over circumstance they wrote the most golden page of their story, and enriched the blood of all who follow them.

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You can find a certain humour in war if you look for it, though war is not amusing, and life at home has many more entertaining incidents in it than life at the front. One officer of The Royals fell sound asleep in a trench during the climax of a terrific bombardment, and awoke to find himself alone among the dead. (He makes us laugh when he tells the story, but at the time it cannot have been just very humorous.) He pushed on after the retreating army, and though—owing to the mistake of an officer at a cross-roads who stood saying, 'Third division to the right, So-and-so division to the left,' when it should have been the other way about—he lost his way, he found the battalion a fortnight later. Two others came in sight of the last bridge standing on one river just as the explosive was about to be detonated, and maintain that, running furiously toward the bridge, they persuaded the engineer in charge to postpone the fatal moment by brandishing a large loaf, rarest of all articles on the heels of a retreating army. Another who had been sent on ahead to find a billet in a château saw a beautiful bathroom, and was preparing to make use of a

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priceless opportunity when he found that the enemy was upon him, and fled in haste. The transport officer, peering round the corner of a house, saw his beloved transport which he had gathered and cherished until it was reputed the best in the army, go up in matchwood and iron splinters. One subaltern, finding himself on the ground, discovered to his horror that he had a hole in his chest, but struggled gamely on, now walking, now stealing a ride on a limber—just catching the last train of all—and finally arriving in England with no other articles of kit or clothing but a suit of pink pyjamas and a single eyeglass.

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At Meaux the steeples of Paris were in sight; but the hour had struck, and The Royals at last wheeled to pursue.

III

At the Nose of the Salient

The battalion had come through much since then, on the Marne and the Aisne and the Lys, and in trench warfare from Hooze to Neuve Chapelle. Here is a picture of a day's fighting from the diary of an eyewitness—a bald note of facts. It refers to 25th September 1915:—

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'The brigade formed up in the trench in the following order from left to right, 1st Gordons, 4th Gordons, 2nd Royals, one company Royal Scots Fusiliers. Each battalion received separate point of attack, namely, Bellevarde Farm, Hooze Château, Redoubt, Sandbag Castle. Artillery bombardment 3.50-4.20 A.M. General attack then launched. "B" Company was at the nose of the salient; "C" Company on right of "B"; "A" Company on left; "D" Company in dug-outs in reserve. At 4.20 A.M. the battalion advanced to the attack. Complete silence was observed and bayonets were dulled. The front line was captured with few casualties on our side, and shortly after the final objective was successfully attained. Our line was consolidated. One hundred and sixteen prisoners belonging to the 172nd Regiment of XV. Prussian Corps were taken and three lines of trenches. All four officers of "B" Company were hit before German front line was reached. Touch was established with R.S.F. on right and 4th G.H. on left. There was heavy German shell-fire on the captured trenches. A party from "D" Company tried to make communication trench back to our old front line, 1st Gordons unfortunately were not able to reach the German front line owing to wire being undestroyed and too thick to cut. A gap was thus made between 1st and 4th Gordons. The enemy pushed bombers through, thus getting behind 4th Gordons. Desperate hand-to-hand fighting ensued. O.C. "A" Company was forced to defend his left flank. A German counter-attack moving N. to S. by C.T. across the Menin Road, The Royals' machine-gun did great execution. Terrific bombardment by German heavies (H.E.). "A" Company was ordered to retire on our old front line to get in touch with 4th G.H. on left. "B" Company to keep in touch ordered to do the same. "C" Company rinding enemy on left rear, position became critical. No battalion at all now on left, 1st Gordons having failed in their objective, and 4th having been withdrawn owing to flank attack in front of 1st. No battalion now on right either. "C" Company in danger of being surrounded. Captain N.S. Stewart personally reported the danger of his position. A company of 4th Middlesex were rushed up—all our men by this time having been used up—to the nose of the salient, but could not man it owing to terrific barrage of fire. "C" Company, completely cut off, fought its way with the bayonet back to its former front line. Colonel Duncan reorganised the firing line. Both sides spent the night in gathering in the wounded.'

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So ended the containing attack from the Ypres salient. But is not every sentence a spur to the imagination?

Two days later, the Corps commander, in personally thanking the battalion, complimented it on 'the smart appearance of the men who *showed no signs of what they had gone through.*'

It was to this famous battalion of a great Regiment that I was now attached as one of the four Presbyterian chaplains to the 'fighting Third' Division.

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WINTER WARFARE

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CHAPTER VI

WINTER WARFARE

I

The Shell Area

The shell area is all the land behind the trenches which is under fire from the enemy's guns as a matter of course. It is not a pleasant place, for that reason, to walk about in, and our own artillery, cleverly concealed, is apt to open fire unexpectedly within a few yards of the passer-by in a way that is very disturbing. It is a dreary land; a dank air broods over it, an atmosphere of destruction and death, of humanity gone awry and desolate. I remember the almost ecstasy with which one April afternoon some of us found ourselves among the purple hyacinths on Kemmel hill. Poor Kemmel, once a pleasure resort whither happy Belgians went for the benefit of their health, now far from that—and not particularly healthy! These battered villages are now merely sordid; only Ypres maintains a personality, an air of undefeat all its own. It too is a ruin, but unlike the others it is a splendid ruin. At every cross-roads the brooding crucifixes hang. The British mind does not like this constant reiteration of mishandling and defeat in the death of Christ. It does not seem to it to be the final message of the Cross. Indeed, it is the product of the mediaeval, monkish mind. It was not until the tenth century that the representations of the Crucifixion showed Our Lord as dead; it was much later before the emphasis was laid on agony and despair. Once from among the debris of the convent in Voormezele I rescued such a representation of the Body of Christ, limbs gone, broken arms outstretched, and it seemed a symbol. But that is not the final truth, defeat and despair. The cross-road shrines would not look down on those groups of tramping Islanders if it were so. And as you look back over the paradises of the firing trench, across the bleached and scarred countryside, you remember that *that*, like the scenes of agony in the clearing station after Loos, is the plain, visible proof that His Spirit lives in the world of men. But what a Via Dolorosa it is, that grim ditch dug across Europe, with its crouching men behind the snipers' plates. Strange path for the twentieth century to have to walk in, to prove that compassion and righteousness still live.

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In all this area the British soldier walks with a singular *insouciance*. It is not simply that he is brave. He is that, supremely so, and not least when he is very much afraid and will not show it and carries on with his job. But there is more in it than that. There is a kind of warlike genius in him which makes him do the right thing in the right way, so that he appeals to humour and comradeship as well as to gallantry. It was one of our sergeant-majors who before a battalion attack offered £5 to the man of his company who was first in the enemy's trench. Think of it for a moment. He appealed to their sporting instinct; he turned their thoughts from death and wounds and introduced a jest into every dug-out that night; and he indicated, without boasting, that he was going to be first over the parapet. He made it certain that every sportsman in the company—and what British regular is not—would strain every nerve to be first across. And the cream of the jest was that, stalwart athlete that he was, he was first across himself! The same may be said of the officer; he wins more than obedience from his men. I have seen senior N.C.O.'s crying like children because their young officer was dead.

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Along with this courage and comradeship and humour there is often a great deal of fatalism. It expresses itself in many ways, in the reading of Omar Khayyam—'The Ball no Question makes of Ayes and Noes'—for example, in the indifference so often shown by men if they lose through their own fault some 'cushy job' and have to go back to the line, or in the doing of really foolish things, foolish because dangerous, but useless. I remember sitting outside the dug-out of Captain Chree (who afterwards laid down his life on the Somme) at battalion headquarters, and watching the shelling of one of our batteries of 18-pounders some five hundred yards back. The Germans had searched for it repeatedly with lavish expenditure of ammunition, and that afternoon they got it repeatedly, with very unpleasant results. But of course there were many misses. Whenever the German shells fell short they burst in the field, in front of the battery, which was bounded on two sides by a road. In the midst of the bombardment a soldier came down the road facing us and, instead of walking round by the cross-roads, cut across the field in which shells were bursting. He deliberately left comparative safety for real danger simply in order to save himself five minutes' walk. On another occasion, when I was at dusk one evening in Vierstraat, a Tommy came along carrying some burden. At this point he got tired and planted it down right in the middle of the cross-roads. Another man told him he could not have chosen a worse place for a rest, that the Boche was always firing rifles and machine-guns up the road, but he prevailed upon to move only with the greatest difficulty. Perhaps in another class was the soldier the doctor and I came upon suddenly in a ruined house in Ypres kicking with all the strength of an iron-shod boot at the fuse of an unexploded German shell. A friend with his hands in his pockets was watching the proceedings with much interest. He said he was only wanting the fuse as a souvenir, but he would soon have got that to keep and a good deal more. The doctor was quite peevish about it, as the saying is!

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When an attack is being made or repelled, the concentration of batteries in action turns the country in front of them into a nightmare of noise—a terrific and intolerable noise' in Froissart's phrase. The incessant slamming of the guns makes it impossible to hear enemy shells coming. The first intimation is their arrival. But the orderlies go backwards and forwards through it all with superb courage. Wounded trickle down the trolley line to the dressing station, and an occasional group of prisoners come through. It was on a day like this that I saw Davidson and Rainie for the last time. When The Royals were moved up from the support trenches to take over from the battalion which had delivered the attack at St. Eloi, some one said to Captain Davidson, who was going up at the head of his company through a terrible barrage, 'This is going to be a risky affair.' 'Yes,' he replied, 'but it's not our business whether it's risky or not. My orders are to go through.' Soon after he fell. He was barely twenty years of age.

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II

'I hate war: that is why I am fighting'

There is a garden in Vlamertynghe with a marble seat overturned beside a smashed tree, a corner just made for lovers, once. An enormous crump hole fills the greater part of the garden, and the wall has fallen outwards in one mass leaving the fruit trees standing in a line, their arms outstretched. Across on the other side of the road Captain Norman Stewart lies buried. But his memory lives in the hearts of men, and wherever the 2nd battalion gathers round its braziers and in the glow of them the stories of the heroes of the regiment are passed on from the veterans to the younger men, Stewart will be remembered with reverence as one who not only upheld but created regimental tradition.

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It was a bombing affair in which he died, detachments of Suffolks, Middlesex, and Royal Scots, under his leadership, being ordered to drive the enemy out of the tip of the salient. Barricades made progress almost impossible in face of a murderous machine-gun fire. Owing to the confused nature of the fighting no quarter could be given, and desperate fighting ensued with bombs, bayonets and hand to hand. Finally ten yards were gained and the ground consolidated.

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At one point of the fight, finding progress otherwise impossible, Captain Stewart mounted to the top of the barricade in full view of the enemy, with shells and bombs bursting all round and under machine-gun and rifle fire. Though wounded he remained there in face of certain death for over ten minutes. From bucket after bucket handed up to him he still hurled bombs at the thronging enemy beneath, until a sniper crept round to his flank, and this heroic Scotsman fell.

'They pass, they pass, but cannot pass away,
For *Scotland* feels them in her blood like wine.'

The night before he died Stewart said to a friend, 'I hate war: that is why I am fighting.'

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III

Billets and Camps

The camps to which the battalion returned after each tour of the trenches were for the most part out of danger except for an occasional shell, but it was only when we were withdrawn to the 'rest area' that we felt any sense of freedom to settle down and take stock of ourselves. Both Colonel Duncan and Colonel Dyson, to whom I owe countless kindnesses, were keen disciplinarians, and Major Everingham, the Quartermaster, imperturbable, efficient, could really perform almost superhuman feats. A man can only know his own department, and in mine the standard of a battalion is shown by its attitude to religious observances. A bad battalion finds too many engagements to turn out in any strength on Sunday. I used to feel so proud as the old Royals, every available man on parade, would march up behind their pipes and drums, alert, well-groomed, punctilious in all the minor forms that are so important an evidence of a battalion's condition. In rest billets we all got to work; there were marches and manœuvres, cinematographs and cross-country runs, football matches and boxing competitions. These men when stripped were so much more beautiful than in their clothes. Of how many in civilian occupations could that be said? The battalion would be refitted; a brewer's great vat was commandeered for a bathing-place; the village school was turned, every evening, into a recreation room; and a communicants' class was started. Not for the first time I longed for a brief, clear statement of our Church's faith. The cumbrous complicated Catechisms and Confessions are magnificent monuments, but they are worse than useless under such conditions. A *Credo* which could be written on a blackboard and pointed to as the Church member's essential Confession of Faith, to be developed and expanded according to the need and circumstances, would be a real power in a chaplain's hands. The men's behaviour in billets—ramshackle barns for the most part—was almost exemplary. Only once or twice small episodes occurred in connection with hen-roosts, and on one occasion a sucking-pig was slaughtered amid its brethren at the dead of night. It must have been a temporary madness that possessed the author of this escapade, for he had no possible chance of escape. It was pleaded on his behalf, on his appearance before the Colonel, that he had recently done a gallant deed, but as some one said, 'If every man who did a gallant deed was allowed to kill a pig there would not be a pig left in Flanders.'

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It was the cleanness of the air and of the soil that made a rest back among the far-stretching forests of the Pas de Calais so different from one nearer the line. To get on bridle-paths and roads free from lorry traffic and let your horse out at full stretch over the fallen leaves down some long grey-purple vista of bare trees, and feel the clean wind whistling past your ears and smell the fresh odours of the great woods, to see the blue smoke drifting up from some forester's cottage, or for a moment in passing catch a glimpse of a fairy-story scene of charcoal burners grouped together in a glade, was to ride into another world of thought and feeling. My little horse John, one of the five horses left of those who crossed with the battalion, felt it too—thought perhaps he was in old England again. But the British soldier hates manœuvres and marches and drills and inspections. He would rather be left in peace in his trenches, in a 'quiet' part of the line at least, than bothered about those things. Movement, too, has an exhilarating effect on him, and so when orders come to go back into action he tramps off with remarkable goodwill. I remember one

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battalion of Royal Welsh Fusiliers, suddenly rushed up from rest, pulled out of the station singing a song of which the refrain is something like 'Ai, ai! Vot a game it is!' at the top of their voices. And it really is by no means a game. As the Colonel used to say (very moderately), 'Life out here is not all joy!'

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One November evening I was picking my way cautiously through the mud camp near Reninghelst, and hearing the tune of a famous hymn, drew near to listen, for Jock sometimes sings to hymn tunes words that certainly never appeared in any hymn-book, and I wanted to make sure that it *was* the greatest hymn in the English language which was being sung. It was a quiet night. Now and again a heavy gun fired a round, and infrequently, on a gentle wind blowing from the trenches, was borne the rattle of a machine-gun. From all the camp arose the subdued confused noise of an army settling to rest for the night. Some tents were in darkness, in others a candle burned, and here and there braziers still glowed redly. It was from one of the lighted tents that the singing came, each part being taken, and a sweet clear tenor voice leading. The tune was old 'Communion,' and they had just come to this verse:

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'Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
Save in the death of Christ, my God:
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to His blood.'

How often have we sung that, perhaps thoughtlessly, in comfort at home, but these lads had in truth sacrificed the 'vain things.' With a lump in my throat I waited for the last verse:

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'Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were an offering far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my life, my soul, my all.'

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HOW THE ROYALS HELD THE BLUFF: AN EPISODE OF TRENCH WARFARE

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CHAPTER VII

HOW THE ROYALS HELD THE BLUFF: AN EPISODE OF TRENCH WARFARE

I

Waiting

The beginning of March found me with a battalion of The Royals in a rather battered Belgian town. Its centre received a good deal of attention from enemy artillery, but it offered two attractions which brought in officers from divisions all around. After all, to men accustomed to living in the trenches, the atmosphere was one of almost Sabbath peace. The hall where 'The Fancies' made much of the humours of trench life to uproariously delighted audiences was crowded out night after night. You could not find anywhere greater zest and enjoyment. The striking comradeship of soldiering, the common experience of audience and actors, and the abandonment of all thought for the morrow, gave that impression of cheerful carelessness the root of which is not happiness but the conviction that the future is so uncertain and the possibilities so dreadful that he is wise who lives for the hour only, even as the hour may snatch life from him. I thought I knew the head in front of me, and, leaning forward, saw it was my brother-in-law. It has always struck me as quaint that he, who had been with his battery for a year and a half, and I, who had been out for nine months, should have met again under such circumstances. I had pictured a stricken field and much coolness exhibited in an admittedly dramatic moment—something in line with Stanley's 'Dr. Livingstone, I presume.' It was comforting to find it otherwise, but, as Smee says in *Peter Pan*, it was 'galling too.' First when looking into a shop window, and now in a concert hall, in all these months of war! We said, 'Not a bad show, is it?' 'Not half bad.' But there have been some strange meetings in this war. A private in our battalion discovered his son, a boy of seventeen, in a new draft which had just come up to the line. He had run away from home and been lost to sight. The father set matters on a proper footing by thrashing his son there and then in the front trench!

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War was not very far off after all. Two days later we were having lunch in the comfortable warm restaurant which is this tedious town's other attraction. We drank our coffee to the accompaniment of the nasty sound of arriving shells. Every time a shell screamed towards us the stout lady behind the counter dropped on hands and knees, emerging flushed and trembling after each had burst. We were rather amused; but when we went out and round the corner of the street, the body of a man was being swiftly carried away wrapped in a brown blanket. Forty soldiers, it was said, had been killed and wounded. Distracted women stood in little groups in the passages of the houses, and there was much blood in the gutters.

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Only a country invaded by the enemy drinks to its dregs the cup of war, but the narrow belt a few miles behind the friendly army's trenches enjoys great prosperity. The love of home or the love of money keeps the population in many places where it would be better away. One beautiful spring day I took shelter behind a farmhouse in the Hallebast-Vierstraat area until some shelling on the path ahead had died down. The farmer's wife came out and we got into conversation. A rise in the ground gave some shelter from the German lines, but she told me that any movement on horseback was immediately sniped with whizbangs. The day before all her cows had been killed by shell-fire in the paddock behind the farmhouse, but if she and her elderly husband let their land go out of cultivation, how were they to live, and if they left, where could they go? When high-explosives blew great holes in their sown land they just filled in the holes and ploughed and sowed the place over again. The settled sadness of her face and voice haunts me still. Others, however, stay in danger because they are making so much money. Several shopkeepers in this town admitted they had never known such prosperity. The estaminets make enormous profits from the sale of very weak beer. A friend of mine, having drawn battalion pay in notes of too large amounts, was told to return to the paymaster and draw it in smaller sums. He found the office closed, and turned into a little village shop to see if they could change a part of it. To his amazement they changed the whole of it from the till. The total amount was ten thousand francs. But how many Belgians have lost their all?

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Our billets were clean and very airy. For some reason, though all furniture had been removed, the presses, which were all open, were full of beautiful bed and table linen. It was very tempting, but fortunately we resisted the temptation. The morning after we arrived, about seven o'clock, a disturbance arose below. Angry women's voices were heard in altercation with the servants, there were hurried footsteps on the stair, and a moment later our door was thrust violently open. Two strapping Belgian women strode in and demanded answers to many questions. We adopted our friend the Major's plan, and feigned to know even less French than we did. We were anxious to be very inoffensive as we lay on the floor and watched these determined individuals throwing open the presses and wardrobes. Inside the linen lay untouched, folded neatly; we felt thankful we had left it so. They stamped out again, and we heard the Colonel's voice raised in protest next door. The doctor and I looked at one another. He seemed rather pale, and I noticed for the first time that his head rested on an enormous soft pillow covered with a spotless linen pillow-slip edged with beautiful lace.

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But next morning we had a different awakening. Dawn was rising wanly from the east to another day on the Salient. The broken windows were rattling and the floor trembling under the dull continuous thudding of a concentrated bombardment. We lay and listened, and for the thousandth time hated war. We knew that men, some of whom we knew and loved, were going over the parapet, many never to return.

That night, as dusk fell, the old steeple with its rent side looked down on cobbled streets thronging with ordered ranks of men standing ready to move. Here and there a few officers spoke together, or a man gave his chum a light from his fag, or straps were tightened. A rifle butt rang on the pavement, and the adjutant's horse moved his feet restlessly. These men had no illusions as to what they would probably have to face; but none guessed that there lay ahead the most dreadful test of physical endurance which the old battalion, since the great retreat, had ever known.

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II

The Bluff

What had happened was this. Soon after our division had been moved back to the rest area, part of the line which it had been holding was strongly attacked and lost to the enemy. Several counter-attacks failed, and finally our own Division was brought back from rest to recapture the lost trenches. One brigade attacked with great dash and success. The lost trenches were re-occupied, and our own brigade, which had been lying in support, was ordered to take over and hold them against the expected counter-attacks. The Bluff, which was the main feature of the position and the worst part of which The Royals, as the senior battalion, were given to hold, was a low hill jutting out at the re-entrant to the Salient, south-east of Ypres. It was a strong tactical position commanding the approaches to our trenches, as the enemy well knew. Seen from our front line farther south it had the dead, bleak appearance of all ground that is much shelled. Pitted by high explosive, burned yellow by fumes of gas and shells, and stripped of every living thing, with blackened stumps of trees sparsely scattered on its summit, this muddy hillock dominated the flat lands, and, on the sunny morning when I first saw it, seemed indescribably sinister and menacing. It said to me, 'I am war, the antagonist of everything clean and comely, of everything fresh and young: misery of mind and body, torment of kindly earth and all its little

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growing things, lover of all that is foul and dead.'

III

'We've keepit up the reputation o' the auld mob, onyway'

That night the weather suddenly changed. There had been a hint of spring in the air, but in an hour that was wiped out by a bitter north wind sweeping the bare fields with icy rain and snow. The transport, pitched in the filthy morass known as 'Scottish Lines,' saw its labour of three weeks thrown away in a couple of nights. For the human beings there were a few tents and huts, but in face of the searching wind canvas seemed quite porous, and the huts were badly built and had a hundred openings to the bitter air. But up at the Bluff conditions were terrible. The trenches had disappeared under repeated bombardments, and had become mere chains of shell holes in which the men stood up to their thighs in liquid mud. When the C.O. arrived to take over the headquarters' dug-out he found it blown to pieces. Within lay the bodies of the previous occupants—four officers. Another dug-out was finally found. It was deep in a bank at the end of a narrow passage twenty feet long. Within was a chamber six feet long, four broad and four high, and in this place, so horribly like a grave, the C.O., second-in-command, and adjutant lived for three days and four nights. A candle gave light, and whenever a shell burst above the flame jerked out. The sergeant-major and the orderlies and servants lived in the tunnel, squatting on their haunches in the mud. Outside there were no other dug-outs at all. The shelling was continuous, but the cold was far worse. Men sank in the mud and remained motionless for hours. Many fell into shell holes and had to be hauled out with twisted telephone wires. The wounded suffered horribly. Owing to the mud and the German barrage no supplies could be brought up, and it was impossible to light braziers. On the fourth night relief came, but it was daylight before the last company sucked itself out of its mudholes and waded back in full view of the enemy. Fortunately a blinding snowstorm swept down from the north and hid all movement just when it seemed certain that disaster would occur. Every available vehicle was sent up to meet the battalion, but there was a long walk before these could be reached. The men crept along on sodden, swollen feet—no gumboots had been obtainable. They came along in groups, now of two or three, now of six or seven, or one by one. They were bent like old men, and staggered as they walked, their faces set and grey. The most terrible thing of all was the utter silence. Snow muffled the fall of the dragging feet; it lay thick on the masses of ruins in the shattered empty villages; and when the brigade major's greeting rang out men shrank and looked fearful at the sudden sound. Yet when I spoke to any, as they staggered through the snow past the point whither I had gone to meet them, life flickered up for a moment from the depths of that final exhaustion. 'What price Charlie Chaplin now, sir!' said one man whose wavering footsteps led him hither and thither. And another in simple words summed up the heroic simple spirit of them all: 'Well, we've keepit up the reputation o' the auld mob, onyway.' Indomitable men! Who could ever vanquish you?

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Rest meant tent boards under frozen canvas, but it was rest. On that weary morning even the uninviting outline of Reninghelst village seemed like home.

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THE HISTORIC TRIANGLE

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CHAPTER VIII

THE HISTORIC TRIANGLE

Surely so long as great deeds appeal to the British race those weary miles will be always sacred. Within them lie the unnumbered British dead, 'the dear, pitiful, august dead.' Comrades of the dauntless warriors of Gallipoli, comrades of the sailors who have gone down fighting in the cold waters of the North Sea, brothers of all brave men suffering for a clean cause, they leave the issue with us. As long as the British Empire endures, and it will endure so long as it works for God and no longer, the memory of the heroes of the Ypres salient will live and glow.

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'I hate war: that is why I am fighting,' said one of them. They fought not merely for their country, but because they believed they were fighting war itself. We shall not be true to their memory unless we remember that. 'Slavery will always be,' said the defenders of slavery. 'It is impossible to prevent those things, human nature being what it is,' said others of schools like Dotheboys Hall. A little time ago England and Scotland were at one another's throats; a little before that clan fell upon clan with vindictive fury. When we have beaten Germany, who stands for the old, rotten, pagan belief in old, rotten, pagan things we must see that we do not betray the men who died fighting because they hated war.

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But war has good in it too, they say. Yes, and amid its hideous wrong no doubt there was good in slavery, as there is in cancer or blindness. Almost any evil or agony may be the root of noble qualities, and war is no exception.

These men died in the hope that it might be impossible for a civilised nation again to thrust this evil on the human race. They died trusting us to see that Europe would not again have to choose the alternative of entering upon such an agony or of forgetting its honour towards God. Force, it would seem, must long remain the last remedy, but might it not be force resting on a pivot and striking with effect wherever international crime seeks to disturb the peace of the nations? The mere knowledge of such a united determination would at least be a powerful persuasive. That may be only a dream. The immediate fact is that the doctrine of Will to Power must first be crushed, represented as it is to-day by Germany and her dupes. But men who have been through the furnace will not rest content with less than the solemn attempt, in the name of the dead, to put the nations of the world in a worthier relationship to one another than has so far prevailed. Our brothers who have fallen died in the hope that for succeeding generations life would be different. They died believing that because of their sacrifice it might be possible to substitute for the German (or any other) Will to Power the Christian Will to Righteous Peace. This effort alone can be their fitting monument.

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Transcriber's note: The table of contents states that section III of Chapter VII starts on page 128. It actually starts on page 127. The link to this section has been adjusted accordingly.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK ON THE KING'S SERVICE: INWARD GLIMPSES OF MEN AT ARMS ***

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