MC 2035 POOR DOCUMENT

From a Chaplain at The Front

The Redemption Price the British Army Is Paying in Belgium; The Battle of Ypres

(Methodist Recorder.)

I left off in my story of the pilgrimage and work of the 14th Field Ambulance, at that point where the 5th division was for the time being acting as "corps reserve" to the Meerut division. Of the first week that we were attached to the Indian Army I know little, for the cold, raw mists of this land of dykes and mud flats wakened in my blood my almost forgotten enemy malaria fever, and it was entirely due to the kindness of Colonel Crawford that I was not invalided to the base, and my connection with the field ambulance brought to an inglorious close. A field ambulance is not supposed to burden itself with sick, but to evacuate into the nearest clearing hospital; however, in my cast an exception was made. With so many doctors to advise, prescribe, and treat me, I made a speedy recovery, and after a week or ten days' misery was able to resume work.

By that time we were established at La Gorgue-Estaires, the infantry supposed to be resting in billets all day, and at night occupying the reserve trenches, but in reality doing nearly as much time in the front line trenches. Major Fawcett was in command of the advanced dressing station, and during the days that followed he, and the junior officers with him, did exceptionally good work. Once they were severely shelled, and it almost looked as though they would have to retire, but though the projectiles fell within a few yards of the buildings they were occupying, nothing was hit, and the bombardment was not repeated. Their chief trouble was that when they went up to the trenches at night to fetch wounded—as always it was impossible to approach them in daylight—they were persistently "sniped."

One of them described it to me as "half a mile of the unhealthiest bit of road I have ever yet struck. As sure as we pass a certain point ping, ping, ping go the bullets all around us, and it's impossible in the darkness to discover where they are coming from." So serious at last became the menace to all traffic that a systematic search of the countryside was undertaken by the provost marshal and his military police, assisted by the infantry, with the result that in other neighborhoods a number of snipers were captured and "sniping" for the time being ceased. In our vicinity, however, there was no chance until at last a capture was made.

A detachment of infantry found a German soldier in full uniform, hiding in the roof of an empty house. For ten days he had lived in our lines, his only food raw potatoes, and every night he had gone forth to do his deadly work. He said that the company to which he had belonged had been nearly exterminated in a recent night attack, only ten men were left. So the colonel had sent for them and said, "You are no good as a company, so you had better all get off into the English lines; you will be more useful there as 'snipers' than you are here," and they went, though each knew that he would never return. Our men talking of it afterwards said, "Of course we should have shot him, not taken him prisoner—he'd killed seven of ours besides those he'd wounded. But he looked so miserable and hungry that we gave him some bully beef and bread, and when he'd 'wolfed' that we gave him some cigarettes and then marched him off to the provost marshal." Which thing is characteristic of Tommy Atkins, God bless him.

During these days I find it hard to decide what division or what army we belong to—part of the time we were with the Meerut division, at another time we were attached to the Lahore division, and nominally we were part of the second army. Several times I heard of Mr. Knott—our chaplain from India—but I never met him, the fates seemed to decree that our meeting should be not yet. Of his work I was told again and again, and a gunner belonging to one of the Indian batteries said, "He's a bit of all right, Sir. One of the best. A real pukka soldiers' padre."

The Call to the North.

On Sunday, November 15, the "call" of which Sir John French had spoken in his message to the troops came, and we trekked north in the direction of Bailleul. The march was not a very long one, but it lives in our memory by reason of its discomfort; cold, piercing wind, then driving sleet, and finally cold, incessant rain. That night we billeted at a farm just south of Meteren, the next day continuing our march through Bailleul across the Belgian frontier, to the little town of Dranoutre. On this march I had an opportunity of judging the spirit and fitness of the infantry, which were superb. It was hard to believe that these were the same men whose condition a fortnight before had seemed so deplorable.

Clean, shaven, smart, the lines on their faces which had seemed to make old men of them all, vanished; the look in their eyes which had never ceased to haunt me, no longer there! they looked capable of responding to any "call"—the finest troops in the world. They had not had their long-promised rest, but they had had change, and with the wonderful recuperative power of the British soldier—the wonder of all who know him—they were rejuvenated. Over incredibly bad roads, often up to their boot tops in mud, they marched, with a swing that would have done credit to a royal review on Laffan's Plain, and as they marched they chanted their war song, "It's a long, long way to Tipperary."

It seemed hardly possible that for three solid months they had been fighting without a single real day's rest. As they crossed the Belgian frontier their spirits rose, "This is better than the last time we crossed it, ain't it, Sir? Then we was on the run, having got more than we wanted at Mons, but now the boot's on the other leg. Now, if we could only capture 'Kaiser Bill,' or even 'Old One O'clock' General Von Kluck) we might get home for our Christmas dinners after all."

At Dranoutre the field ambulance was billeted in the village school (whilst the principal inn, or estaminet, was converted into a dressing station and operating room. The infantry—over a greatly extended line, alas—proceeded to take over trenches from the French, and our allies were hurried off to strengthen the line at a point where the pressure was greater. The gravity of the situation—only partly realised by ourselves—has been made known in Sir John French's despatch, also his reluctance to so soon call upon the exhausted troops of the Second Army Corps, but the need was such that he could not do otherwise. How constantly one heard the cry in these days. "If only England had listened to Lord Roberts we should not now have been short of trained men," whilst in the trenches the troops grimly joked, 'I' suppose there is a Kitchener's army, but none of us poor beggars will ever live to see it come out here."

The Redemption Price

Of the days that followed I find myself quite incapable of writing—no pen could do justice to our men, truly picture the fierceness of the fighting, adequately describe the sufferings which our troops so heroically endured. Never in the history of our army have men had to face such odds, endure such hardship, or stand against such an appalling artillery fire as did the British expeditionary force during the closing days of October and the first half of November. To the First Army Corps fell the heaviest share of the fighting, and probably the story of the conflict round Ypres never will be told in detail, nor will it ever be known at how heavy a cost in human lives that victory was won. The flower of the German army was checked and pushed back, the invincible Prussian Guard was annihilated, the dash for Calais and the Channel ports failed, but the losses in the First Army Corps, and in the Third division (Second Army Corps) were such that we in Flanders have never ceased to marvel that there was not an instant rally of all the able-bodied young men in the Empire to supply our pressing need for men. The regular army has been literally laying down its life to hold the enemy in check until the new armies being trained in England are fit to take the field. Lives are being poured out like water which need not have been sacrificed if the youth of our land had been ready and trained.

The Fifth division (with which I am serving) was not in this fiercest fighting. To them had been assigned the task, first of supporting and when necessary relieving, the Indian army, and in the second phase of the month-long battle holding a long line of trenches with a force which, in point of numbers, was utterly inadequate for such a purpose. Day after day they sustained a continual bombardment from heavy artillery; night after night they rolled back the fierce attacks of the German infantry. No relieffs, no reserves, a thin khaki line, doggedly holding in check the overwhelming German hosts. Day by day they dug themselves nearer and nearer to the enemy's lines, until in some places the opposing forces were only forty and fifty yards apart. The weather had now become arctic—heavy falls of snow, bitter frost—and the conditions in the trenches simply baffle description.

Frost-bite was common, and the marvel was how any troops, especially men who had already passed through such hardships, could continue to endure, and fight so magnificently. All that could be done for them was done. Warm goatskin coats were issued—in them the men looked more like Teddy bears than British soldiers—charcoal braziers were sent out to the trenches, warm clothing from friends "at home" was distributed, and under the efficient organization of the Army Service Corps, they were better fed than troops in the field have ever been before. But when all is said, the fact remains that they suffered more than can be put into words, and no praise is too high for the officers and men of the infantry during these trying weeks.

Entrenching the Field Ambulance.

The school-house which was occupied by the 14th Field Ambulance looked over the fields to Mont Kemmel, which from early morning until dark the Germans were pounding with heavy lyddite shell—it seemed as though every inch of the hill must have been searched by such continuous fire, and that a fly could not have lived in it. The only living thing on the hill as far as I know was an officer of the Royal Artillery, who sat in a tower on the hill top "observing" and telephoning back information to our batteries.

For a month the hill was shelled by the enemy and during the whole time the artillery officers took their turn, a day at a time, in the tower, and not one of them was hit. The little town of Dranoutre had not suffered much from shell fire, but it was well within range of the German guns, and it was feared that at any moment shells might be bursting in our midst. So the Field Ambulance was ordered to "dig itself in." Probably for the first time in the history of the Royal Army Medical Corps, the men of the corps were employed digging shelter trenches, and constructing bomb-proof shelters ("funk holes" the men call them) to which our sick and wounded could be moved if necessary. Quite an imposing line of trenches was constructed in the field opposite our home, and Captain Lindsay, who superintended the carrying out of the work, was justly proud of the R. A. M. C. defences.

The ordinary work of the ambulance at this time was of necessity done at night, for it was impossible to reach the trenches in daylight. The line held by the 14th Infantry Brigade was along so extended a front, that many of the nightly journeys of the ambulance wagons exceeded ten miles, there and back; and beyond the point to which wagons could be taken in safety, was a "carry" of over a mile. What it means to carry a wounded man over a mile in a stretcher, across rough fields and in inky darkness can be better imagined than described. In order that my readers may better understand what doctors and bearers were facing every night of the week, I will try and describe one such night journey.

An Unhealthy Climate

All day long there had been heavy shell and rifle fire, and just before the first lot of ambulance wagons started out there came a message that the Church of England chaplain was needed, so the Rev. D. P. Winnifrith accompanied them. By the time the next party—going in the opposite direction—were ready to start, another message had come asking for a chaplain, so I, too, set out, the other officers in the party being Captain Lindsay and Lieutenant Chesney. I need not describe the trek in the darkness over well-nigh impassable roads, until after some miles we reached cross-roads where the wagons halted—beyond this, even in the dark, it was not safe to take the wagons. So we continued on our way with the bearer squads carrying their stretchers.

Another 400 yards and we reached a ruined cottage—the roof and the upper storey had been carried away by a shell explosion—this was the regimental aid post of the East Surrey Regiment, and here we found Lieutenant Eccles, R. A. M. C., with a house full of wounded. "Not very good quarters, are they, Padre? I had quite a nice house this morning, but they shelled us out of it, and half an hour after we left there wasn't one stone left standing on another, and this was the best we could get within reasonable reach of the trenches. No, I haven't any dead for you to bury; I buried them myself this morning when we had to move. Hope you don't mind, but I did my best, and said a prayer or two over the grave."

Leaving Captain Lindsay with sufficient bearers to deal with the wounded, Lieutenant Chesney and myself with the remainder of the bearers continued on our way to the lines of the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry. At one place the road was almost impassable even on foot—a great shell had burst in the middle of the road making a huge hole stretching right across it, A sharp turn and we were on a cart track crossing open fields. "This is a very unhealthy bit," said my companion casually. "We always get 'sniped' here, and there's no cover. Do you hear them?" Zip-zip; buzz, ping! Yes, I heard it, and was devoutly thankful when at last a farm was reached, and Chesney said, "Here we are, Padre; Matthews should be somewhere about."

In a few minutes Lieutenant Matthews, R. A. M. C., appeared and led us to where his wounded were collected in the farm kitchen. "Sorry, padre, but the grave isn't dug yet. We've had a busy time with the wounded, but as soon as we've got them off it shall be done." Having seen the wounded on their way I proceeded to a neighboring farm where was the headquarters of the regiment, and there waited until word came that the pioneers had finished their task, and the grave was ready. I wish I could picture that farmhouse kitchen; it would help you to realize the hardships that are being faced by officers and men. "Quite cosy, aren't we?" said the adjutant; "lucky to have any billet at all, and this is warm, even if it isn't exactly clean."

But what a place it was! A large square room with heavily timbered ceiling, lighted by one candle, and a fire of logs in the great open chimney. Indescribably filthy—both Germans and French had occupied it before our people—windows blocked with straw so that the enemy might not see the light and fire at it, for at this point British and German lines were only fifty yards apart. Lying about sleeping on the stone floor were the officers who happened to be off duty, all fully dressed and in their equipment, plastered with mud from head to foot, unshaven, dirty, unkempt—I could hardly recognise any of them. "Look a bit crumby, don't we" laughed a subaltern; "but we've had ten days of it, and could all do with a wash and a shave." Then out into the darkness to where the grave was waiting.

"Bit of an attack on, Sir," said the pioneer sergeant; "but they're firing high and all the bullets are going well overhead; they don't matter; but there's a sniper who seems to have a line on that grave. It's so dark that it's certain he can't see us, but it seems to have a sort of instinct; as sure as we go near the place he begins firing. There you are, sir; he's at it again. Lucky he ain't a good shot."

My sad task done, there followed the lonely tramp back in the darkness, first over the "unhealthy" stretch of road, then along dark ways where our own sentries were the chief danger, and finally about four a. m. Dranoutre. Mr. Winnifrith, I found, had not yet returned, and it was two hours later when he arrived, having had a longer trek but a similar experience to my own.

Reinforcements and Relief

About November 20 there was a perceptible change in the situation, and the strain lifted. The German infantry attacks ceased; their big gun fire was not nearly so heavy, and what there was of it lacked the effectiveness of that which had preceded it—large numbers of their shells fell without exploding. News came that the second desperate attempt to break through at Ypres had been driven off with heavy loss, and we were no longer a "thin khaki line," for reinforcements had arrived, and behind us now were masses of fresh troops and batteries of heavy guns which outranged anything the Germans could bring against us." Then came relief for the war-worn men in the trenches, and the promise of at last a real rest.

In these "easier days" the chaplain found opportunities of holding services amongst men, many of whom had not had the chance of attending public worship for over three months, and to all of us these services were fraught with fervent thanksgiving and praise. Amongst those whom I met for the first time during these days was the Rev. A. J. Boullier, of the Irish Methodist Church, who is serving God, and his King and country in the Royal Artillery. His friends will be pleased to know that he is well and happy, and in no way the worse for the experiences through which he has passed—indeed to him has been given an unique opportunity of exercising a true Christian ministry.

On November 23 I personally received a great surprise—I was informed that I had been granted seven days' leave of absence, and was to proceed to England on the morning of the 25th. It seemed too good to be true. Of our journey by motor bus (which a few weeks before had been plying in the London streets) from Bailleul to Boulogne I need not write, nor of the crossing tf Folkestone; suffice it to say that at five a. m. in the morning I was within sound and reach of the guns, at 3.30 p. m. I was in London—the change was so great that it was almost overwhelming.

The King's Visit tothe Front

December 1 saw me back again at the front—refreshed by the change of the past few days, and better able to meet whatever might come. I arrived just in time to be present when His Majesty the King visited and inspected the 14th Brigade. It was a great sight to see these veterans who had been fighting without rest from the beginning of the war, drawn up to meet their king—and what a cheer they gave him. Dressed in the khaki uniform of a staff officer, and accompanied by the Prince of Wales. His Majesty inspected his troops, and pinned on V. C.', D. S. O.'s, and D. C. M.'s to officers and men who had well-earned them. Overhead was the hum of the engines of an aeroplane scout keeping watch and guard, and in the distance, the rumble of guns, for we were on the edge of the fighting line. Then more cheers for the king, and—a surprise. The Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry had a cheer to themselves for "the Duke of Cornwall."

Looking rather surprised and very young the Prince of Wales stepped forward and acknowledged the greeting of his own regiment with a salute. As the royal motor-car passed from our sight, we could trace its course by the cheers which came from the troops through which it passed, and marked that it was travelling in the direction of the trenches Later we heard that the king had come well up into the firing line, had watched the batteries at work, and had actually obtained a bird's eye view of the scene of the recent fighting, from a hill which none of us would have exactly called "healthy.". The effect of His Majesty's visit to the front it would be impossible to over-estimate. To the whole expeditionary force it means inspiration, and the proud knowledge that the king cares for, and is interested in his soldiers—he himself has been to see us, and has seen with his own eyes what we are doing for king and country.

A Postscript of Gratitude

I have exceeded my space, so must conclude, but before doing so I should like to express my thanks to the many friends who have sent me comforts for the use of the troops. I have tried to acknowledge every parcel, at any rate with a postcard, and I am sure all will realize that it is not possible for me to do more. But though a post-card seems a small acknowledgement of such generosity, yet it is meant to express a gratitude that is almost beyond words. During the last week I have been getting two and three mail bags full a day, and to send merely postcards in acknowledgement means a considerable labor. So well have I been supplied with gifts that for the present I have no further need of body-belts, mufflers, or mittens; the things I am in crying need of are note-paper and envelopes, indelible pencils, and candles while such things as tinned coffee and milk and cocoa and milk, are a luxury greatly prized by the men.

OWEN S. WATKINS.
14th Field Ambulance, 5th Division.
British Expeditionary Force.

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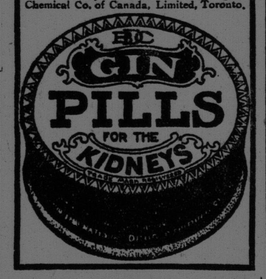

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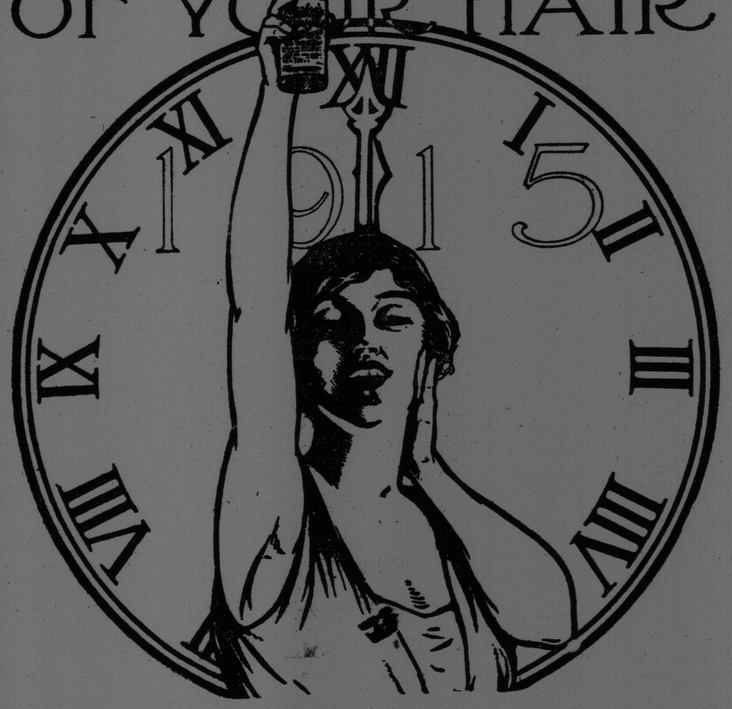

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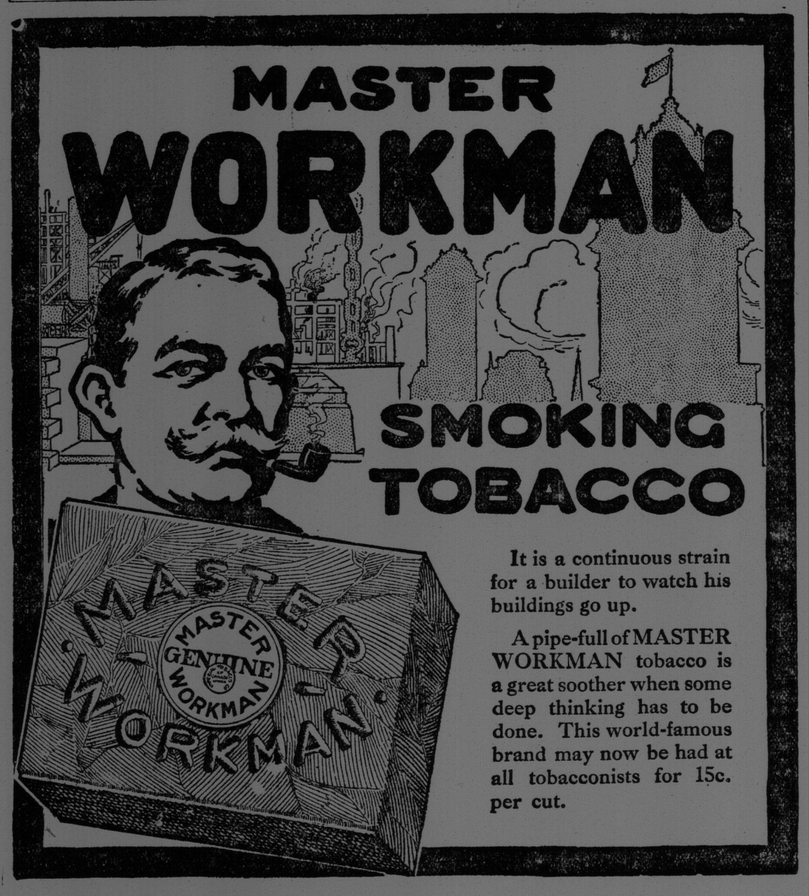

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WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE ASSOCIATION.

In the rooms of the St. John Art Club last evening the annual meeting of the Women's Suffrage Association was held. Officers were elected for the ensuing year, and reports submitted of an encouraging nature reviewing the progress of the last year. Mrs. E. H. Flewelling, who has held the office of president since the death of Mrs. Fiske, in retiring from office, made an impressive address which was well received. A letter of appreciation was read from Miss Grace O. Robertson, secretary of the Associated Charities, thanking the members of the W. S. A. for their generous help in providing garments for the poor. The receipt of 105 garments was acknowledged, and it was announced at the meeting that two dozen more were now ready. The new board of officers is composed of Miss Clara O. McGivern, president; Mrs. E. B. Hooper, first vice-president; Mrs. H. S. Culver, second vice; Mrs. W. H. Myles, third vice; Mrs. W. F. Hatheway, corresponding secretary; Mrs. F. B. Cowgill, recording secretary; Miss K. M. Sutherland, treasurer, and Mrs. E. K. Milligan, auditor.

Madrid, Jan. 15, via London.—It was made known in Madrid this afternoon that Queen Victoria of Spain is confined to her apartments with an attack of scarlet fever.

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