



BEAUMONT HAMEL



By W. J. CAREW



BEAUMONT HAMEL! What memories throng around that name; what hearts quicken at its mere recital; what eyes glisten as its utterance brings back the glorious yet tragic day of July 1st, 1916! That name will ever be associated with the illustrious annals of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment and future generations will speak with reverence and pride the name of that tiny French village which they shall never behold. Beaumont Hamel has vanished forever from the sight of man, as completely as Pompeii or the lost cities of the Nile. A mere handful of brickdust and ashes marks the spot where our men earned for themselves undying glory, and won from a seasoned English General the tribute of "better than the best," just as at another time and place a Frenchman watching a similar display of heroism uttered his famous phrase: "It is magnificent, but it is not war." Well might General Hunter-Weston call our men the bravest of the brave. The sight he witnessed on July 1st, 1916, was that of men gallantly attempting to accomplish the impossible in the face of certain death; a spectacle of human courage elevated to the sublime; an exhibition of heroism that has never been excelled in the annals of warfare. The Germans were impregnablely entrenched at the bottom of a long grassy slope, their lines resting on the village of Beaumont Hamel and separated from the British trenches by a distance of about 500 yards. A continuous bombardment by the British artillery had taken place for a week previous to July 1st, and the Germans were fully alive to the fact that an attack was imminent. It was to be the great advance heralded long before by the military authorities.



Cambrai Street.



German concrete shelters at Wytschaete.

For this attack the Regiment had been moved up from Louvecourt, eight miles distant, and had arrived in the trenches in the early hours of the fatal day. The morning of July 1st broke clear and cloudless and just before seven o'clock every man was in his place accoutred with his full equipment, his eyes alight and his heart afire, waiting the signal that was to launch the concerted attack upon the enemy's position. The roar of the artillery was tremendous, but through that babel of sound every eye and ear was strained to catch the signal which was to hurl them on the foe. Precisely at seven o'clock a deafening roar was heard sounding distinctly above the terrible thunder of the artillery, and hundreds of tons of earth were thrown heavenward as part of No Man's Land was ripped up beneath the explosion of a mighty mine which had been months in preparation. The immense crater caused by the explosion is still to be seen. The first wave of the attack followed, and its description has been admirably portrayed by Mr. F. A. MacKenzie, the War Correspondent, in his article on Newfoundland's part in the War, published in "The Great War." He writes:—

"The Ulsters had advanced astride the Ancre, and the Inniskillings were attacking to their left. But where it was hoped the Germans had been all killed, men suddenly emerged from dug-outs. They put their machine-guns in position even before our artillery had ceased. They met our men with a withering fire before which none could live. Two British regiments moved forward, one after another. Both failed, not through any weakness or lack of dash, but simply because the German fire was irresistible. Our own men were the first to admit that for once the enemy surpassed anything we had known of their fighting power. The bravery on either side was as great as anything seen

"The first two attempts had failed. The Newfoundlanders were to have been used to push home the victory obtained by the first attacking parties. In place of that, word was sent that they were to make the third attempt to break the enemy line. Victory was crowning our arms at point after point; we must not fail here.

"There came a pause in which our artillery spoke again. A heavy fire was concentrated on the German lines, and now came word for the Newfoundlanders to advance. Their colonel called the company commanders together, and told them what was before them. There was no hesitation. With a cheer, every man jumped over the parapet, with the colonel in the van. Again the German lines suddenly swarmed with men. They emerged once more from the dug-outs in which they had remained sheltered. It seemed as though every concealed spot had a machine-gun behind it, and every machine-gun was firing at once on our men.

"Success was impossible. The terrific machine-gun fire was soon followed by shell fire. The men continued to move forward at a rapid pace, without flinching. They fell by the units, by the scores, soon by the hundreds. A few reached the beginning of the enemy's entrenchments, only to die there. They had not even an opportunity to strike a blow at the foe. The whole thing was over so quickly that it seemed impossible that in a few minutes a gallant regiment should thus have been wiped out. Yet when the roll was taken afterwards it was found that out of a total of eight hundred and eleven Newfoundlanders engaged, only ninety-seven were unwounded, two officers, the commander, Lieut.-Colonel Hadow, and the adjutant, Captain Raley, and ninety-five rank and file. The bodies of ten officers and forty-six men killed were recovered; fourteen officers and four hundred and forty-two men came in or were brought in wounded, and two officers and two hundred of other ranks were missing. Some of them had fallen killed or wounded, too close to the German lines to be recovered."

In this short description what a tragedy is compressed! But it tells a story which must make the blood tingle and the heart throb with pride that our fellow countrymen, blood of our blood and bone of our bone, so heroically upheld the glorious traditions of the race. Beaumont Hamel needed but another Tennyson to elevate the deeds of our

soldiers to the heights of idyllic heroism. Oblivious to everything except the call of duty our men advanced to certain death, in the words of General Hunter-Weston:—"As if on parade. There were no waverers, no stragglers, and not a man looked back. It was a magnificent display of trained and disciplined valour, and the assault only failed of success because dead men can advance no farther."

At Beaumont Hamel Newfoundland received its first real baptism of fire. Scarcely a hamlet around our shores passed unscathed through that fatal day, and thousands



Destroyed German Pill Box near Kieberg Ridge—the site of the Memorial to our Newfoundland dead heroes.

mourn the loss of some relative who yielded up his life in the historic charge. It is for Newfoundland the one great outstanding tragedy of the War, because the hopelessness of the task which the Regiment essayed at Beaumont Hamel was only realized months afterwards.

In February 1919 I had the privilege of visiting the scene of the fighting with Sir William Lloyd, then Prime Minister, and Mr. Coaker, and the following description of the battlefield as it then appeared is taken from an article which I wrote shortly afterwards for the "Newfoundland Magazine":—

AT BEAUMONT HAMEL.

"The village was absolutely destroyed. Part of the church, about ten feet high, was left standing, but beyond this the entire village was a mass of unrecognizable ruins. Our guide conducted us over the ridge which slopes from the village, leading to the trenches and the huge crater marking the spot where the big land mine was exploded prior to the attack on the German lines, and we stood on the battlefield of Beaumont Hamel.

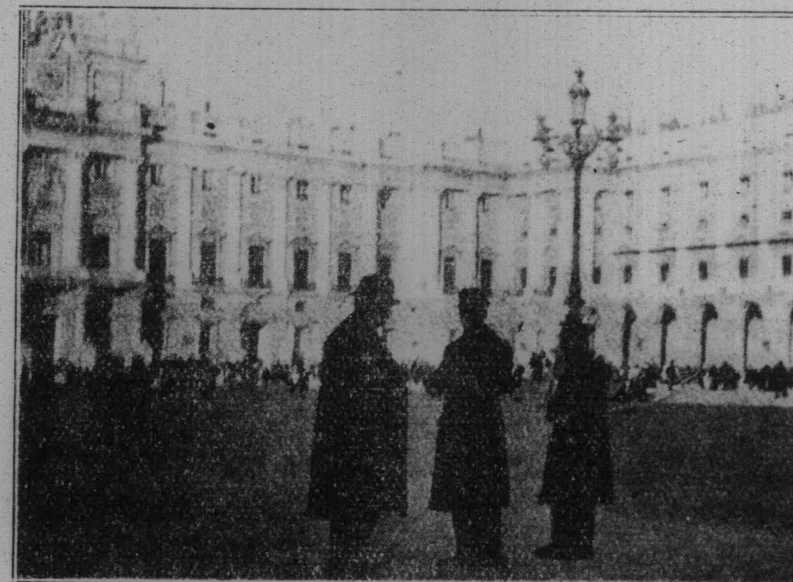
"If I should die, think only this of me,
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is forever England"

cried Rupert Brooke, the soldier-poet. Standing on Beaumont Hamel a similar feeling swept over us. This was not the soil of France. It was part of Newfoundland, enriched by the blood of our soldiers, and made precious to our people for all time by the 'richer clay' which lay concealed in its bosom. Over the ground on which we stood had poured forth the 'mass of fiery valour' in the ill-fated charge of July 1st, 1916. It was with solemn feelings that we walked over No Man's Land and traced the path taken by our soldiers in their glorious advance.

"We also visited the ravine behind the German lines which we afterwards learned about one hundred of our men had reached, and where half of them had fallen. It was fitted with elaborate dugouts running for a great distance in the earth and formed a secure base for the Germans manning the trenches above. The whole area seem-



Old Jail at Oporto in the Jewish quarters. The oldest portion of Oporto.



Palace at Madrid—Hon. Mr. Coaker and Mr. R. B. Job in the foreground.

ed practically undisturbed. Rifles with bayonets and wire-cutters attached, were stuck in the ground where they had fallen from the nerveless hands of soldiers who had been killed or wounded on the wire. Water bottles, cartridge belts and other equipment were scattered around, the barbed wire wound its cruel length across the ridge, and the menacing stretch of trench looked as if it might vomit forth death and destruction at any moment. A stillness as of the grave reigned over all.

"On every hand could be seen evidences of the awful destruction which had been wrought by the big guns. 'The abomination of desolation' appeals to most people as an excellent literary phrase, but to realize its full significance one has simply to view the battlefields of France. The shattered villages, the tortured earth, the blasted trees, seem rather the result of some strong convulsion of Nature than the desolation wrought by the hand of man. Of entire villages hardly a stone has been left upon a stone to mark the spot where once happy homes flourished and human activities were pursued. It is a veritable desert, a desert of empty shells, barbed wire, weeds, broken wood-work and mud, a desert of silence and solitude, a leprous disfigurement upon the face of God's good earth."

Beaumont Hamel has been purchased by the Government of Newfoundland, and, in so far as it is humanly possible to locate them, all the bodies of our soldiers will be concentrated in a cemetery upon that sacred ground. There they will sleep the long last sleep wrapped in the soil of the land which they died to save. Death has

"The flower of their souls he shall take not away to shame us,
Nor the lips lack song forever that now lack breath,
For with us shall the music and perfume that die not dwell
Though the Dead to our Dead bid welcome, and we Farewell!"

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