

The STRETCHER-BEARERS

BY PATRICK MacGILL

(Author of "The Great Push," Etc.)

THE battalion was resting in a village far behind the trenches, and Fenton, newly out, discovered that a rest as the B.E.F. knows it is a period of sweat and hard labour. Then, the month being May, the sun shone as only the sun of France can shine, and of course Fenton roasted. He got up in the morning at six o'clock, Brigade time, and formed up with other men outside his billet. These men were generally inclined to take a gloomy view of things at that hour, and vowed that Brigade time skipped two hours at night and found them again when on parade. That was the beginning of a day which might be fairly called strenuous, and Fenton, who was still new to things, wondered what it was all for—since it wasn't fighting—and whether everybody worked as hard as he did.

Now amongst others who lived in his billet there were two men, and these men seemed to labour little. They had no bayonets to burnish, no rifles to clean, no ammunition to carry. When other men went out they stopped inside, and they were in when Fenton returned from parade. Once when he was engaged in a mimic attack on a wood he came across these two men in company with several others and all were lying in the shade of the trees smoking cigarettes and listening to an address which the M. O. was delivering. Fenton had been hard at work all morning. His legs were tired, his shoulders ached, the sweat poured down his face in tiny rivulets. He had no time to lie in the shade . . . How he envied the stretcher-bearers!

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It was Fenton's first spell in the firing line and the trench in which he found himself was a comparatively quiet one, but in bad repair; so no end of work had to be done there. Parapets had to be built, saps had to be strengthened, wire entanglements had to be laid, and so on. In addition to tasks like these, there were ration fatigues, water fatigues, and fatigues for carrying up ammunition, and tools. Fenton was a good, willing worker, and while he laboured he watched the two stretcher-bearers and decided that they had a very quiet life. One of them was a thick-set man of medium height who seemed to be always laughing and smoking cigarettes. His name was Rogers.

"An easy job yours," said Fenton to him on the afternoon of the second day.

"Not so bad," said Rogers with a smile. "Next time there's a vacancy I'll let you know."

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On the following day the British attacked, captured a German trench and held it. Some men, a few of the most reckless spirits, went a bit beyond the trench, but were forced to fall back again leaving a number of wounded behind them on the ground. It was then that Fenton, ensconced in the trench, saw the stretcher-bearers at work, saw them going out into the open field of danger, tending the wounded and carrying them in, not only to the trench, but back to the dressing station at the rear. The way was one of peril, but the men, knowing their duty, never hesitated. Once, twice, three times, Fenton saw Rogers and his mate pass across the trench carrying the limp figures of the wounded on their stretchers. And Rogers always bore on his face a good-natured smile. He seemed to be enjoying his job.

When darkness fell Rogers came into the trench, but his mate was not with him.

"I've lost him," he said, "and I want somebody to take his place, a volunteer. There's only one more wounded man out in front now, so I want to get him in. Who'll come with me?"

"I'll go," said Fenton, and he went.

Rogers seemed to be very weary. On the way out he came to a halt several times and once, even, he sat down. "I'm a bit tired," he said. "But I'll soon buck up. This man's the last; then I'll have a rest."

They reached the wounded man and in the dark it was impossible to distinguish his features. He was breathing heavily and his face looked very white.

"He's unconscious," said Rogers. "He's on the stretcher, my mate helped me on with him, then he got hit."

"Is he dead, your mate?" asked Fenton.

Rogers pointed at something dark which lay on the earth near the stretcher.

"My mate," he said in a low voice. Then, "You take the head, Fenton, and I'll take the legs; they're lighter, and I'm a bit weak."

The journey in was tortuous. The bullets whistled round the men's legs and once or twice the handles of the stretcher slipped from Roger's hands. Then both men would halt for a second, draw breath, and without speaking a word continue their journey.

They got into the dressing station about midnight, and then Fenton discovered two things which caused him to open his mouth in wonder. The man on the stretcher was a German. They had risked their lives to succour an enemy. And Rogers was wounded. When his mate got killed, he, himself, had got hit in the shoulder with a shrapnel bullet.

(Bairnsfather Illustration by Permission of The Bystander.)

THE only other sea-war photograph published in the same dramatic class as that on this page was the turn-turtle of the Bluecher in the famous fight off Dogger Banks two years ago. In the accompanying photograph, enlarged from a snapshot taken by one of the passengers, a transport ship is shown after she had been hit by a German torpedo and beached on the rocks in the Mediterranean. Crew and passengers are seen going hand over hand down the ropes and dripping with the foam. The overturned life-boat on the davits emphasizes the dramatic character of this remarkable picture.

