

Retrospection

Written for The Western Home Monthly by T. C. C. Beamish

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UP ON THE MARNE.—Dawn. Slowly the torn and outraged bosom of France is bared to the breaking day; coldly the wintry sun reveals her once fair face; harshly it gleams upon her piteously wan and desolate brow, and lights the hushed awfulness of her bloody couch—then, from the black shadows of the fleeing night, there steps into the glimmering Dawn, with swift and dreaded strides—Vengeance! a fierce exultation in his remorseless, chilling eyes. Stay! His time is not yet; his course, even, is arrested by the drear silence. A dead silence! Dead yet pregnant with the shaping thoughts and living presence of countless armed men, motionless and watchful, tensely alert for the Sign.

A silence, dead, yet alive with the awful power of death, as the hot, still heart of the desert in the summer, as the stealthy fumes of gas, insidiously killing; not the soothing calm of the deep forest glades or the majestic silence of the summer seas; no, not this—but an utter absence of sound, a horrid void, a vacuity, loathsome in its intensity, chilling in its expectancy, numbing in its force.

Back of those lines of watching men—the Guns! waiting, waiting; cold, cruel and implacable, with Death flitting phantomlike along their serried ranks, kissing with snarling lips their willing mouths—grisly, avid kisses, ghastly welcoming kisses.

The essence of death—in the air, below, o'er all pre-eminent, all pervading in that fateful hour; and the foul savor of it on the lips—in the nostrils! and 'fore the drugged eye—contorted heaps of blackened, riven corpses; snarls of rusted wire; shell-holes, their lips hoarfrosted, significant as the gaping, pursed mouths of lepers; here, a limb—there, a head, a boy's perhaps; who knows? A handsome, jolly boy—a mother's idol—once! and now! Only a blackened head, a hideous travesty of "God, made man"; a slimy, greeny-black, it is! Ah!

That! a tiny hole in a sandbag—a trickle of dirt.

That! a gasp, a trickle of blood, twitching hands—a life! death! Silence again—nerve tautening.

Crash! Zoom! Crr-rash! The silence rushes into oblivion. The great guns are roaring for their prey, the mines burst in fury from the affrighted earth, spewing forth their carcassed vomit—the pride of youth, the loved of anxious homes; the shrapnel bursts and sprays its dreaded hail of lead and bursting steel, its horrid cantination marking its

envenomed flight to its living targets below! From the remorseless, sullen sky speed, like thunderbolts of hate, the aerial bombs—nerve shattering in their suddenness and inconspicuousness; innumerable machine guns chatter; Ah! the writhing, screaming boys—the fiercely groaning men; the harsh cries of triumph, the snarls of hate, and the deep sobs of despair.

A frantic, smothering vortex of sound; a raving, racking, cataclysmic uproar, annihilating every sense save a gnawing, despairing, craving for a moment's respite—just a second to draw a free breath to adjust the faculties. How it presses, presses the very soul into a mad stupor; how it bears down and thuds—thuds, into the very fibre of the brain! Only a second's respite! No! A shell explodes in a heap of the dead out there in No Man's Land—one rises to his feet! His arms wave, how angularly! Is he beckoning?—Hah! He's down again.

One glimpse of madman's brain, seething and twisting, is revealed—the soul recoils in horror.

See! The arc of heaven shrinks and closes inwards and downwards, re-echoing a hundredfold the savage tumult. Then, in that hour, when the Queen of Hell, gnashing and clawing the attendant furies in her travail, brings forth her accursed child, Chaos, shrieking to life; God, with a face full of sorrow and pain, turns to the wall—the sky—and dies! And the pall of death envelops all; and the mouth of Hell yawns wide—ravenously.

Four Years! Five!

A shadow deep and awful blots from our sickened eyes the light of hope.

It lifts; by Vengeance' side Justice appears; in her left hand she gently holds the broken, bleeding heart of Womanhood; her scales are at her feet, no need for them now; with her right she points to the wall—the sky—and dies! And the pall of death envelops all; and the mouth of Hell yawns wide—ravenously.

Peace Day; happy throngs crowd the streets; flags are flying; strangers laugh and are friends; and as I look upon them all my heart leaps, and those years seem like a bad and mocking dream of mediaeval ignorance and lust.

One lesson it, at least, has taught us—the power of comradeship and Right; and what infinite possibilities the future holds for all in these young and virgin lands, who have conned the lesson aright, and who will not allow themselves to be led astray by the isms of fractious and vicious sects.

Hedges of Box

By Martha Haskell Clark

Hedges of box, lined green and dim against a twilight sea,
Where breath of rose and lavender comes drifting, ocean-blent.

Mid all the fragrant garden-bloom there sweeter steals to me
Along the shadowed garden path your pungent-brooding scent.

Within your guarding arms tonight old footsteps softly pace,
Old voices wake your quiet aisles and echo to and fro,
And neath your close-clipped archways pass the laughing, wilful face.

Of one who loved your small green leaves so many years ago.

The little, wistful dreams I thought had wandered with the years.

They met me at the wicket-gate amid the shadows dim,
They tore my fresh-awakened heart twist tenderness and tears.

Beside the chiselled dial-stone and by the fountain's brim.

Oh memory-fragrant box that broods in silence cool and green,
The little pan is crumbling now, and wreathed with lichens gray.

Yet fairer with each passing year, with mounting walls serene,
You stand in living guard upon a vanished Yesterday.